

GILLIAN FRANCES SUGDEN: INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THESIS: SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DOCTOR IN
EDUCATION DEGREE

Factors that Influence the Student Understanding and Experience of Feedback

A case study investigating postgraduate student perspectives of
feedback in a university business school

Word Count 38,827

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work
presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

FINAL THESIS FOR EdD

Abstract	4
Preface	6
Chapter 1 – Introduction to the Study	
Rationale for the Study	15
What is Feedback?	17
Early discussions of feedback in Education	18
Feedback in an Educational Context	22
The Research Question	25
Scope and Methodology	29
Conclusions	33
Chapter 2 – Background to the Study	
University Background	34
Academic Calendar and Course Structures	35
Organisational Structure	36
Westminster Business School	37
The Student Experience	38
Quality in Course Provision	40
Context of Student Learning within the University of Westminster	41
Management of the Teaching Year	42
Feedback at a National Level	48
My Own Role and Interest in the Research	50
Conclusions	51
Chapter 3 – Review of the Literature	
Introduction	53
PEDAGOGIC ASPECTS OF FEEDBACK	54
Essentials for Effective Feedback	54
Self-Regulated Learning	61
Feedback Interventions	64
Guidelines for Formative Feedback	67
The Process of Feedback	70
Learning Transitions and Autonomous Learning	74
THE LEARNING CYCLE	76
STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON GOOD FEEDBACK	82
Summary	86
THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING	88
The International Student	88

Cultural factors relating to student background	92
Language Issues	96
Organisational, Institutional and Political Issues	99
Conclusions	101

Chapter 4 – Methodology

A Case Study in an Institutional Setting	104
Ontological Assumptions at the beginning of the research	105
Ethical Issues in the Research	109
Research Design	111
DATA COLLECTION METHODS	112
Documentation	112
Interviews	113
Questionnaires	119
Triangulation	121
Process	121
STUDENT BACKGROUND	123

Chapter 5 – Findings from the Primary Research

Introduction	127
PRIMARY AND SECONDARY DATA SOURCES	127
SECONDARY SOURCES	127
Documentation	128
PRIMARY SOURCES	130
Preamble to discussion of the Interviews and Questionnaire	130
Interviewees Perceptions about Assessment Feedback	130
Written Comments	131
Understanding the Standards Required	136
The Scope and Sources of Feedback	137
Sources of Feedback	138
Feedforward	145
Student follow-up on Feedback	146
Motivation	147
Academic Development	148
Social and Cultural Aspects of the Learning Environment	149
University and Course Regulations	152
The Effects of Organisational Culture on Student Learning	154
Language	157
Additional Comments	159
Conclusions	162

Chapter 6 – Evaluation and Conclusions

Introduction	163
Findings from the Study	164
The Problems of Language	165
Student understanding of masters' level study	167
Student understanding of how to gain feedback	171
Cultural and Social Influences	174
Organisational and Managerial Factors	178
Internationalisation	179
RECOMMENDATIONS	181
CONCLUSIONS	184
CONTRIBUTIONS TO PROFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDING	185

FIGURES

Figure 1 Opportunities for students to seek feedback	27
Figure 2 Variables affecting student experiences of feedback	28
Figure 3 A model of self-regulated learning	62
Figure 4 Student Learning in Context	81
Figure 5 Factors that affect Feedback success	87

TABLES

Table 1 Responses to Questions 14-16	136
Table 2 Methods by which interviewees get feedback	140
Table 3 Responses to Questions 11-13	142
Table 4 Responses to Questions 9-10	143
Table 5 Responses to Questions 16-17	146
Table 6 Responses to Question 18	147
Table 7 Responses to Question 19	148
Table 8 Responses to Questions 23-24	151
Table 9 Responses to Questions 25-26	157

BIBLIOGRAPHY	187
---------------------	-----

APPENDICES

A	University of Westminster Feedback Requirements
B	Interview Questions
C	Questionnaire
D	Responses to Questionnaires

Name Gillian Sugden

Thesis Title

Factors that Influence the Student Understanding and Experience of Feedback

Abstract

This research investigates the experience students have of feedback during their postgraduate studies and their understanding of the term feedback.. A very broad definition of the term is adopted: any information that can be obtained from the variety of sources available to a student which is understood and received by that student, aids learning and performance, and provides opportunities for improvement and development of learning.

This interpretation of the term has drawn principally on the views of Black and Wiliam (1998) and Perrenoud (1998) but also Sadler (1989), Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Shute (2007).

The research is case study based, involving full-time postgraduate students in a new university business school. Whilst the emphasis in the literature on feedback is feedback on assignment work, usually in written format, other factors, both positive and negative, play a role its success. The study explored whether students made use of a range of feedback methods and whether there were additional factors that affected an individual student's ability to receive feedback available to him/her.

Primary data was collected through a review of pertinent documentation at both School and University level, semi-structured interviews, and the use of a questionnaire to both verify themes emerging from the interviews, and enable triangulation of the data. A literature review carried out prior to the interviews was used for developing interview questions.

The genesis of the study was in personal observations that there were issues relating to the ways in which students responded to feedback on learning on one year masters' courses. Factors that warranted investigation included the methods of feedback provision and possible over-dependence on written feedback, the diverse student mix, and the possible influence of the academic calendar.

The findings from the study indicate that aside from organizational constraints there are improvements that could be made at a local level which would benefit the students' learning experience, principally revision to the induction sessions which include emphasis on both the standard of work expected on a Masters' course and methods students can use to provide feedback. An optimum solution would involve a complete review of the way in which modules are delivered, with the aim of improving student skill levels and self-regulation by placing a greater emphasis on student rather than lecturer input. [466 words]

PREFACE Statement identifying achievements on EdD programme

My reasons for enrolling on the EdD programme were threefold. I wanted the opportunity to learn more about research methods as neither of my MSc courses had included study in this area and I was finding that a more detailed knowledge would be useful to me in my work. The philosophy of the course, with professionalism at its core, was, I thought, appropriate for me in the post I held at the time. The structure of the course, its division between taught and independent study and its accessibility both in venue and time.

When I enrolled I was an academic subject leader for business information management, with administrative responsibility for the curriculum and subject development in the Business School at a post-92 university. My role included responsibility for quality of academic work in the subject area. At the time I had been doing some research in the area of knowledge management and learning organizations with a colleague, we had given several conference papers and had had some papers published. However, as well as learning more about research methodologies I felt that I would be more effective in my job if I pursued a course with pedagogic content. Initially I planned to focus on IT as a specialist area, and computer aided assessment in particular, as this was pertinent to issues in my job at the time.

When I began studying the specialist modules I realized that I would prefer studying assessment issues themselves and then using the knowledge I gained to lead discussions with my module leaders regarding computer aided assessment. I also considered I would gain more from studying with other people rather than on my own, which I would have been had I continued to study computer aided assessment issues in the curriculum subject of science and technology. Therefore I transferred to the specialist assessment systems pathway.

This move proved to be very beneficial for me. I was happier studying in a group and was able to focus my assignment work on looking at computer aided assessment and whether it was an appropriate means of assessing large numbers of students: this module gave me insight into the principle issues that defined good assessment and proved extremely helpful to me in my job role where I was mindful of the need to promote high standards in the assignment work that was set by members of the department. Indeed, all assessed work had to be approved before being given to students and this study helped me to have more confidence when dealing with this part of my job.

The second specialist module was comparative in approach and enabled me to investigate higher education entry requirements in the UK in my own institution and in the United States. This assignment was particularly important to me as I

was involved in internal validations at work, and an application for professional accreditation for one of our courses. It brought home to me that 'believed realities' may prove quite wrong when confronted with actual evidence. My assumption that the majority of students enrolled through 'A' level entry proved quite inaccurate, and I discovered that comparability and fairness were dilemmas in the widening participation agenda but not issues in the US. Both of these assessment modules lead to my being able to push for improvements in the work of the department.

One area where some staff had more knowledge than me was in research, however I found that the study of the three research modules was a great confidence booster for me. Initially an introductory module on methods of enquiry provided an induction to the whole area of research, and was valuable to me in that it introduced me to the range of qualitative methods available to the researcher. This module emphasized for me how choice of method is crucial in relation to the type of data to be collected. It also showed me that data could extend understanding of a topic and could lead on to further investigations: however, the findings did not actually represent total 'truth'.

The module that presented the philosophical underpinnings of research was particularly demanding but of great interest in that it forced me to reflect on what

exactly I understood to be the basis of my beliefs, and on what they were founded, in areas related to my teaching and proved especially important in framing my question for my IFS. It was helpful to me to be able to compare the philosophical approaches to my supposed IFS research in the paper that I wrote for this module.

I was also required to carry out a small research project, which I based around student use and ownership of computers. It provided the business school with a clearer picture of computer ownership amongst students and helped at a campus level to define a strategy for computer provision on site for subsequent academic years. This was at a time when computer prices were falling and increasing numbers of students were able to afford their own laptops. The work also provided me with experience of designing a questionnaire and collating results from it.

At about this time my job role changed during reorganization at the University. I now had management responsibility for academic staff as well as continuing with subject area leadership as a head of department with greater job autonomy. Managing professionals is recognized as having particular difficulties. So The Foundations of Professionalism module gave me a pertinent opportunity to reflect, perhaps for the first time, on what it meant to be a professional and the attributes

that could be associated with managers in a professional and indeed a bureaucratic setting. I also found the discussions that related to whether lecturers and teachers were professionals extremely thought provoking, as I could relate these discussions directly back to my own working situation. The paper that I wrote for this module looked at the changing professional role in higher education and whether there was conflict within these roles. Certainly in my own situation there was some conflict in my role as a manager and in my role as a teacher, and as a member of an external self-regulated body – in my case the British Computer Society. For example was I expected in my teaching role to continue to undertake research when I was also acting as a manager? This module made me more aware of the different pressures that individuals at all levels of an organisation may feel in carrying out the various aspects of their expected roles; and it made me more aware of what I considered to be acceptable levels of performance from staff working in a professional environment. The emphasis of my job role was gradually changing and becoming less 'administrative' since I now had an assistant, and more 'managerial' and strategic. I became more aware through practical examples that academic staff sometimes relate more closely to their specialist subject areas and professional bodies than they do to an institution. This makes the academic manager's role very difficult at times and is a conflict which manager's themselves often experience, but I have found that awareness of

conflicting pressures makes dealing with them much easier both at a personal level and when managing other people.

At this point in the course I had to decide on the area of study for my IFS. In my job I had some worries related to the delivery of postgraduate modules within the department. This had become a particularly important area for me as the department was required to develop non-HEFCE funded courses to supplement income and this was primarily through new master's courses. Many staff who had not previously taught at this level now had to undertake postgraduate teaching. The whole process of assessment concerned me, and I wanted to ascertain whether claims made at business school level, that all our assessment was formative, were in fact true. I also realized that all lecturers were being increasingly monitored to check academic quality management and comparability of results across subject areas. I based my study around postgraduate students studying on courses in my own department. This study enabled me to look in some depth at the topic, to carry out individual research in my own institution, and especially to widen my knowledge of literature on assessment. Undertaking this study gave me direct insight into ethical and bias issues, and also to questions of trust since I interviewed a number of staff from the department who had to trust in my own professionalism to maintain their confidentiality. More importantly I came to appreciate that the purposes of assessment in my institution were

rather blurred and that it was difficult to isolate one aspect of the student learning cycle from any other aspect. On completion I was delighted that I was able to share my findings, which proved useful in discussions with members of my department and it encouraged me that a significant group found the means to improve the formative aspect of the assignments they set. In a more general way there was interest at a school level.

My thesis topic emerged from two areas of my IFS. One of my findings indicated there was insufficient feedback provided on assignment work, and a repeated comment from interviews with academic staff pointed to concern that students did not make use of methods of feedback available to them. I was interested in whether there were misperceptions around the use of feedback and decided that I would make this the focal point of my thesis topic. My own position at that time was that we provided feedback and it was primarily the responsibility of students to exploit it. However, through my own teaching experiences, and my IFS, I was beginning to think that there were underlying reasons why they might not do this, and that there were background factors which prevented our full-time postgraduate students from engaging with it. My thesis has, therefore, developed out of my IFS and looks in depth at issues related to feedback. It takes a student-centred stance in investigating the student experience and what they understand by feedback. It takes a broad view of feedback to include what is considered

quality provision, a wider scope of what feedback encompasses, and it looks at the factors that may influence the student experience.

I believe that this study has value for the business school because we have a high proportion of overseas students on our master's courses with very diverse backgrounds. There is increasing competition in the educational marketplace and quality of our provision is important in attracting students to these courses. We need to be recognized as a centre where students from many cultures and can anticipate receiving a good experience on courses that are geared to the mix of students studying on them. I have already been able to disseminate some of the findings from my thesis to attendees at regular school research seminars and hope this may have influenced some of the changes to course design in the current academic year, and make colleagues more aware of the variety and flexibility that could be integrated into our methods of teaching and assessment. It has proved particularly pertinent to be looking at the issue of feedback at this time as it has become an important issue in higher education with the poor ratings that students give to this aspect of their learning in the National Student Surveys, and currently my own institution is putting more emphasis on discussion of this area of teaching, and I have had the opportunity to contribute to these discussions.

Whilst writing my IFS and thesis I have learnt to design questionnaires and analyse the results using Sphinx software. I believe that I have over the length of the course improved my ability to evaluate my own writing and simplified my writing style. I have also gained experience at analyzing others' writing, and become more self-confident at putting forward my own hypotheses. I feel that both pieces of work have shown me that what is apparently a small area of study when one begins is, in fact, almost too big when once one begins the research, and that the data does not always reveal what one expects. This has been especially true in the thesis. I have also become convinced of the value of small scale research on a case study basis on pedagogic issues as a means of enhancing the knowledge in the context in which one teaches, and the culture of the institution.

[2093 words]

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

'despite the many hours they spend providing feedback to students, it often feels like wasted time' (Crisp 2007 p571)

The quote above encapsulates the thinking behind my study, which is based within the University of Westminster and more especially the Westminster Business School – one of the University's ten schools. The study examines feedback from the student viewpoint, concentrating on the understanding and experience full-time postgraduate students in the business school have of feedback in relation to their learning. The study also considers factors which may influence student understanding and reception of feedback, and how these influences may affect their learning experiences.

Rationale for the study

The impetus for this research came initially from interviews conducted during my Institutional Focussed Study [IFS], where I investigated whether in-course assessment that was set for postgraduate students was formative in nature, as was being claimed. During the course of that study comments relating to feedback were made in interviews with the lecturing staff. One notion that was repeatedly expressed was, to quote from one staff interview, 'students do not take advantage of the methods of feedback that are available to them during module delivery'.

I found this particularly interesting as it mirrored some of my own experiences with similar students. If students missed opportunities to receive feedback, or appeared not to utilize it, then it followed that a significant part of their learning cycle was ineffective. I wanted to find out if staff perceptions were valid, and whether there were aspects of what lecturing staff, and the organization, did that inhibited feedback effectiveness. I also wanted to examine the underlying factors that might affect the student experience of feedback and the implications this might have for our module delivery and induction methods.

Since beginning this study my interest has been further motivated by distribution within the University in autumn 2007 of the views expressed by students in the first National Student Survey questionnaires, completed in summer 2007, about their experiences of studying at University. The indication was that at Westminster there were unsatisfactory responses related to feedback - a common factor for many universities - and this led to considerable examination of the topic across the institution during the academic year 2007-2008, with an increased awareness of the need for enhancing our feedback processes. My interest in this topic therefore proved timely, both within the school and the institution as a whole, as well as being pertinent in the 18+ education community.

What is Feedback?

The concept of feedback is not exclusively linked to education, but has emerged over the last forty years from theories developed within the study of cybernetics, the input and output of systems and the means of regulating them so that they function effectively.

According to Roos & Hamilton (2005) cybernetics 'is the study of inputs and outputs, but not merely when they directly complement each other' (p11) because as they suggested not just mechanical but also human systems could manage these inputs and outputs. Roos & Hamilton developed their views from much of what Wiener (1965) had written when he concluded that received information could be kept for future use. To Wiener this input or information was 'the analogue of memory' (1965 p43), and this memory retained 'the ability to preserve the results of past operations for use in the future' (1965 p121). Wiener later suggested that human beings displayed a 'mechanical fluidity' that was lacking in machines, and that 'the information which proceeds backwards from the performance is able to change the general method and patterns of performance', and if this were true 'we have a process which may well be called learning' (1968 p56). Roos & Hamilton (2005) believed Wiener's ideas were important for two reasons, firstly because he 'linked education to a concept of mind' and secondly 'identified a cybernetic link between the transmission of meaning and the steering of goal-related or teleological (i.e.purposive)

behaviour' (p13). Thus Roos & Hamilton considered that taking a cybernetic standpoint provided 'formative assessment with its own autonomy and integrity.....First, that the distinction between formative and summative is rooted in fundamentally different conceptions of learning. And, secondly, that these conceptions of learning entail distinct conceptions of mind' (2005 p17). As a result of the development of Wiener's ideas the concept of feedback as a crucial element of the learning cycle emerged.

Early discussions of feedback in education

It was Ramaprasad who wrote (1983 p4) that 'feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter': and so made the first direct link between cybernetics and feedback. He went on to state that 'information on the gap when used to alter the gap (probably by reducing it) becomes feedback' (p5). The obverse was also true: if this information was not used to alter the gap it was not feedback, although it was not necessary for it to be utilized immediately.

These views were extended by Sadler discussing feedback in an educational setting: he took a cybernetic stance linked directly to a discussion of formative assessment and feedback, even though the word 'cybernetic' has never appeared in his work. Sadler emphasized (1989) the need for 'a general theory of feedback and formative assessment in complex learning settings' (p119), and the necessity for the learner to take actions that closed the gap between actual and

required levels of performance by using feedback information: however, if the information was inaccessible to the receiver Sadler (1989) believed that 'the control loop cannot be closed and "dangling data" substitute for effective feedback' (p121). It becomes clear that feedback on performance, if not used, for whatever reason, ceases to be feedback. Sadler believed that over time a learner would ideally move from a dependence on feedback to become an independent learner relying on personal judgement to evaluate how to close a gap. Precisely the process that takes place in everyday life, for example, when learning to drive a car.

These two writers appear to have influenced future discussions on feedback to discussion of feedback on performance. Sadler very much relates feedback in his writing to knowledge of performance, generally accepted as 'on assessment', even though he mentions complex learning situations. In a school setting these are more likely to be everyday classroom tasks that occur fairly frequently. In higher education it will almost certainly be assignment work which is likely to be spaced across a term or semester and therefore provide quite intermittent feedback. Over the past twenty years Sadler's views have been discussed and expanded both by Sadler himself and many educational researchers including Roos & Hamilton (2005), and what their writing clearly shows is the development of the feedback concept from closing the loop to improve systems performance, to feedback loops that enable a student to understand how to improve his/her

work in an educational setting. Whilst critical this approach seems to keep the discussion too narrow because although Sadler acknowledged that feedback must be accessible and understandable there remains a feeling that these student groups are homogenous by nature.

In many instances the concepts of feedback in the formal learning environment of our students can be replicated in the way that feedback comes to us in our everyday lives. Frequently individuals actively seek feedback to decide on whether they have reached particular standards or goals that are important to them: for example learning a skill and practising it to perfection, such as driving a car so that a specific standard is reached, and where absorbing and putting into practice the instructor's feedback on performance is crucial. A different example would be learning to swim, where instruction may help but watching others perform the strokes well may give kinesthetic feedback and also aid improvement. There is also the type of feedback that comes from personal reflection on an event such as a party or seeing a play; on a personal performance in music or at work; or on a book or article that one has read and discussed with a friend or within a group. This type of event can effect a change in perception, and/or in behaviour, or help someone perform differently in the future. It can provide motivation to investigate a topic further leading to a changed awareness or an enhanced understanding. In these examples from everyday life there are instances of feedback through listening, reading, thinking

and reflection, observing, kinesthesia, analysis and evaluation, discussion and doing things which lead to making judgements about levels of knowledge, or performance, or understanding in some way or another, and are not all dependent on information provided by other people. This list contains examples of almost all the means of obtaining feedback in a learning environment, although writing and notetaking would usually be included in the latter as well.

One could surmise that one of the issues for students is that they believe feedback in a college setting to be different from everyday life, or do not associate learning in an academic environment with learning in everyday life and think feedback in the two environments is different. Although essentially if processes of gaining feedback have been internalized in day-to-day life one would imagine that it would be something that would unconsciously transfer to an educational setting. Perhaps the issue is more varied and relates to the following three points, which are not mutually exclusive: what students understand by feedback, and their expectations and experiences of it in an educational setting; how feedback is used when it is used; and the reasons why some students do not appear to utilize it at all during their studies. This was the starting point for my researching the topic and the basis for developing my definition of feedback for the purposes of this study. I have chosen to take as wide a view of feedback as possible.

Feedback in an Educational Context

When discussing feedback, writers and researchers are in little doubt of the enormous importance it plays as part of the overall student learning cycle (Boud 1988; Sadler 1989; Black & Wiliam 1998; Ramsden 2002; Weaver 2006) of any individual whether in school, college, or as part of lifelong learning. These writers agree with Hattie & Jaegar that 'the most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement [for the student] is feedback', (1998 p114) with Gipps (1994) importantly placing feedback in context by linking it to the interaction of teaching, learning and assessment.

It follows that opportunities for learning and meaningful feedback that can lead to analysis and reflection and further improve individual learning not only need to be provided but students should be made aware of these opportunities. In this respect, Carless et al (2006, p396) view 'feedback as feedforward', 'the tutor comments should carry clear implications for future tasks' and future learning, 'rather than merely reviewing and/or justifying the grade for a completed assessment', whilst Boud and Falchikov (2006, p 400) suggest, 'assessment activities should not only address the immediate needs of certification or feedback to students on their current learning, but also contribute in some way to their prospective learning' essentially they need to be constructive. A constructivist stance on learning implies that effective learning calls for feedback to place the onus on the learner to develop strategies to improve their learning,

rather than simply saying how the errors in a piece of work can be overcome (Pryor & Crossouard 2007). In other words feedback is a developmental tool that considers each student to be unique and have unique needs in terms of their learning and social background, which in itself suggests that a varied approach to feedback is required. Alongside these individual learning needs there is a need to consider the view expressed by Higgins et al (2001) that 'salient factors in the feedback process are related to issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse', (p272) and that 'the student makes an emotional investment in an assignment and expects some 'return' on that investment' (p272). These views on student backgrounds and the consideration of future action take the argument slightly wider than providing feedback on performance on a given task.

However, any such opportunities must be provided in a way that students recognize and find useful. Unfortunately, Rust (2007) suggests that as educators it is 'in the area of feedback that we are possibly worst of all' (p231) in what we do, a view currently reinforced by the results of the National Student Survey for 2007 and 2008, and discussed earlier. If this is the case, then it is unsurprising if students appear not to respond to our efforts at feedback. We may be providing it in too narrow a way ourselves, or making assumptions about the transparency of our provision. There may also be assumptions on the part of academics that students are motivated to learn in the ways which academics probably are, and

also motivated to do as well as they possibly can. Why should we assume that? Perhaps we are transferring our own perspectives and ambitions onto our students and making assumptions about what they want to achieve: their efforts may be aimed at doing just enough to get through a course, as opposed to aiming high or achieving the best that they can.

Writers discussing feedback tend to emphasize one particular aspect like Sadler (1989): what constitutes good quality feedback (Shute 2007); the provision of feedback on assessment (Hattie & Timperley 2007), factors that affect the reception of feedback (Skyrme 2007) and some which include the wider social context of student learning (Ecclestone & Pryor 2003). A number of prominent researchers have proposed schemes of classifying feedback (Ramaprasad 1983; Sadler 1989; Butler and Winne 1995; Kluger and deNisi 1996; Hattie and Timperley 2007), and in some cases suggesting how a feedback structure can move the learner from dependent to autonomous learning (Shute 2007). The literature contains examples of intervention studies (Huxham 2005; Bulpitt & Martin 2005; Duncan 2007; and Ogier 2005), which aim at improving provision of feedback under particular course or class circumstances, and are not always ecologically valid. There are also studies into student views on particular aspects of feedback (Skyrme 2007; Carless 2006; Orsmond et al 2005; Cadman 2000; Nesbit & Burton 2006). These studies are, in the main, concentrated on investigating one aspect of the feedback process, and are based in one

institution: there is little comparative work. Some such studies have researched student views on assessment feedback.

In reading the literature I was looking for evidence of what was considered effective feedback in the wider context of student learning, along with guidelines on quality feedback generally. It seemed to me that it was important to take as broad an approach as possible in order to address the contextual issues that are detailed in the background to postgraduate course provision in the business school in Chapter Two. I was also seeking verification of whether the social context of learning could be shown to influence student reactions, and if there was evidence that cultural and organizational factors impinge on the feedback and learning cycle.

The Research Question

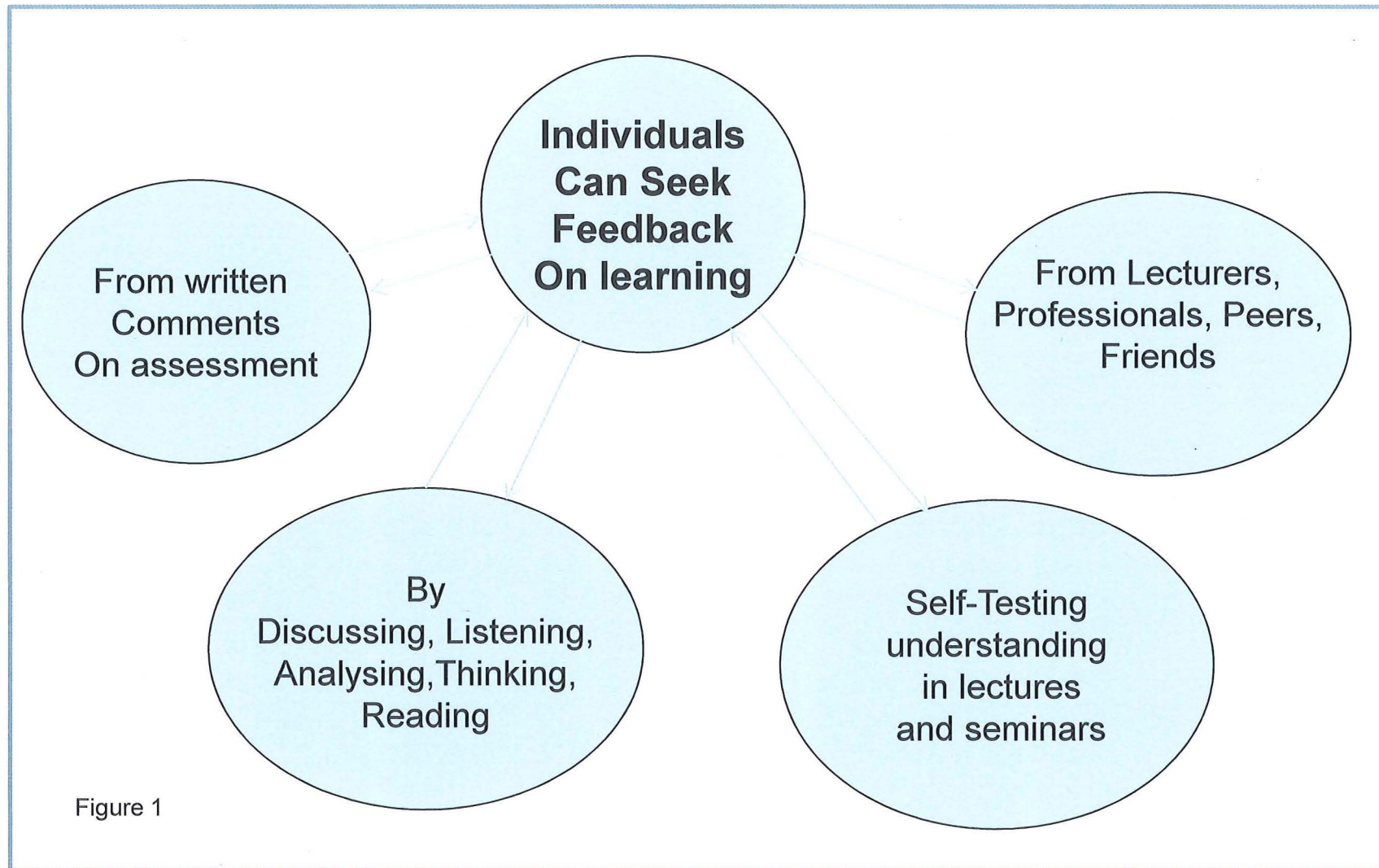
I decided it was appropriate to take a broad definition of feedback: and for the purposes of this study I have taken it to be *any means by which students gather information about their learning and progress from their environment*. It includes assessment and whether the accompanying feedback helps in gap closure (Ramaprasad 1983; Sadler 1989) and leads to autonomous learning (Shute 2007), but is also closely linked to the ways in which we get feedback in our everyday lives and relates to the ways in which the various aspects of the learning process are integrated. Ideally it will also include reflection on lecture and seminar sessions and reading; on personal progress and aspirations;

discussion with peers and lecturers during seminars that provide immediate feedback; self-assessment or indeed any activity that is part of, and provides insight into, the learning process. The definition assumes that students are actively engaged in their learning, and it can be provided by anyone either inside or outside the context of higher education: fellow students, lecturers, parents, relatives or friends. In a higher education setting the learning and feedback process should also incorporate support for lifelong learning.

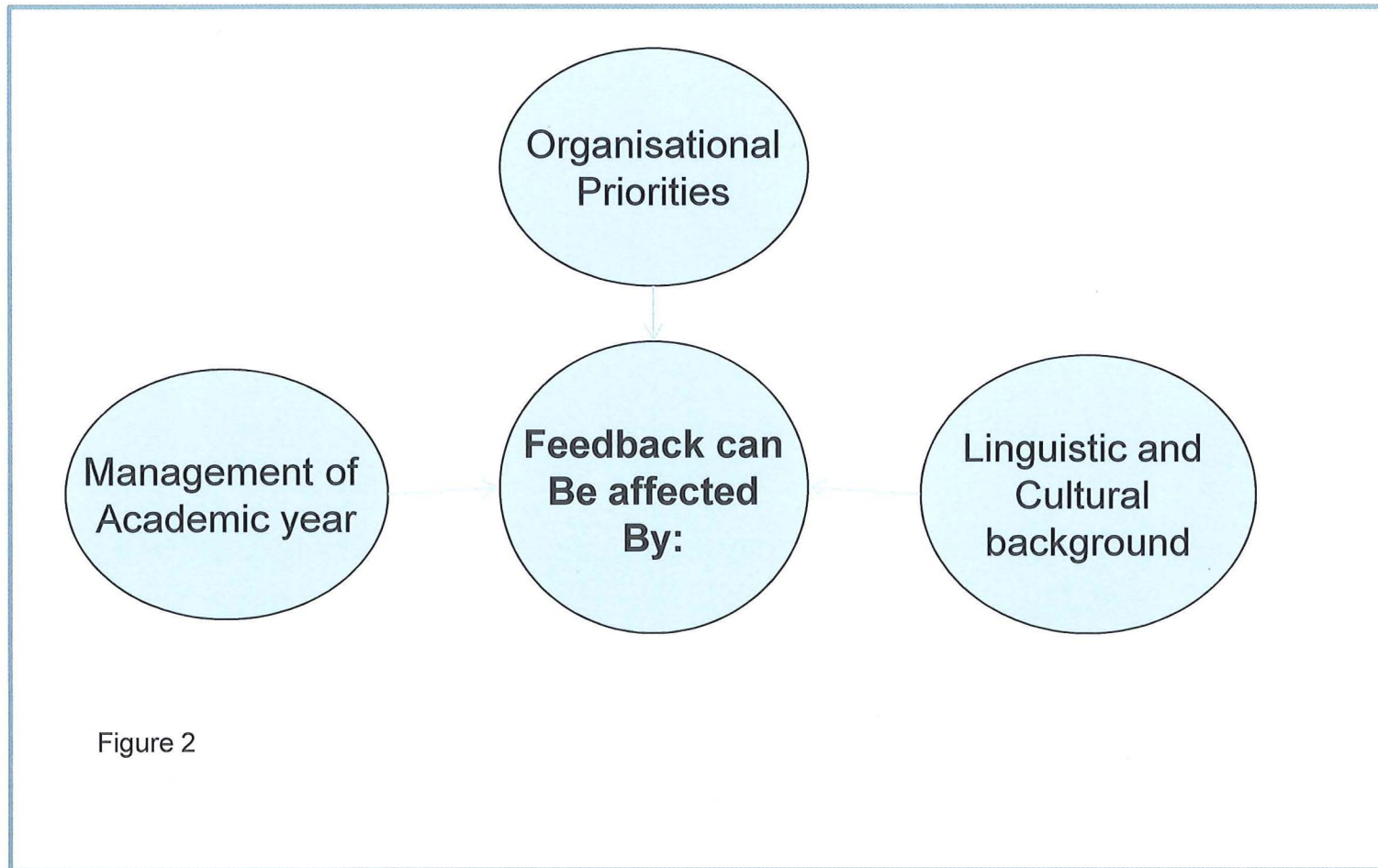
The nearest I have come to this viewpoint in the literature is Black and Wiliam (1998) considering that feedback is used 'in its least restrictive sense to refer to any information that is provided to the performer of any action about their performance' (p53). I consider that this needs some extension to make it wider than feedback related to performance, so that it includes, as Perrenoud (1998) suggests, 'intelligible or pertinent information likely to help him/her understand, remember, assimilate knowledge or develop skills' (p86).

My definition of feedback is, therefore, any information that can be obtained from the variety of sources available to a student, which is understood and received by that student, aids learning and performance, and provides opportunities for improvement and development of learning. [See Figures 1 and 2 below] The title is based on the presumption that there is an issue around

Opportunities for students to seek feedback



Variables affecting student experiences of feedback



how students experience and understand feedback and that there are factors that strongly influence feedback within the learning environment.

My objectives in trying to answer this question were to consider

- Student understanding of the scope of feedback
- Student perception of the relevance and accessibility of feedback
- If methods of provision can influence student reception of feedback
- The effects of the social, educational, and cultural background of students on their learning
- Whether organizational/management issues constrain effective feedback;

and to ascertain whether in my own specific educational setting there were particular circumstances that were especially relevant.

Scope and Methodology

My IFS [2006 p4] detailed my reasons for basing my research around postgraduate students, and I consider these are still valid. As it was comments made in relation to this group of students that initiated my current study I think it applicable to continue to research the views of a similar group. It seems especially important that postgraduate students are provided with feedback in its widest sense right from beginning their studies. They have a very short time to adapt to what may be new methods of teaching, systems and regulations before completing their first assignments that count towards their final qualification: therefore, under these circumstances provision of effective feedback becomes especially important.

There are factors underlying the whole process that relate to reception and understanding, and practicality of provision, and these are the areas where I have focussed my study. I believed that the best way to address my research On 'Factors that Influence the Student Understanding and Experience of Feedback' was to take a student-centred approach, and address the issues inherent in the initial prompt to carry out the study, which was 'students do not take advantage of the methods of feedback that are available to them during module delivery'.

Although feedback in education is generally acknowledged to be a two-way process, teacher to student and student to teacher, this study focuses on student reactions and experiences and what factors may influence them. The issue appears wider than the rather mechanistic approach of a teacher providing feedback and a student choosing whether or not to utilize it.

As previously mentioned I continued to base my research on postgraduate students. However, I widened the scope of this study to include students from masters courses across the business school, rather than from those based in one department. I have limited myself to students enrolled on a full-time basis for two reasons; firstly my previous experience would suggest that any given cohort of full-time students would be younger, more diverse, sometimes studying in

their second language, and quite likely to have enrolled on a course unrelated to, or only partially related to, their first degree so that feedback for them plays a critical role in their studies. [Our part-time students tend to be enrolled on courses with a direct link to their job and as a result have rather different motivations for studying which will lead them to pursue additional feedback if they want or need it.] Secondly, and more practically, due to exceedingly tight timescales within the University modular scheme it should prove easier to arrange interviews with full-time students.

The research is a case study bounded by the timescales of student courses within a modular scheme. All the primary data was collected during Semester Two - that is January-March - and during revision sessions in May 2008. As a case study it is a snapshot of a particular group of students in a particular institutional setting, and can only be said to be representative of these students at that point in time. However it has been possible to triangulate the findings with studies carried out in other institutions and discussed later in the literature review. The study has been carried out through completing a literature review that covers relevant areas influencing feedback; and this, together with some of the unused findings from my IFS staff interviews, has provided the basis of the interview questions.

In attempting to address the question I planned to explore student views on the scope of feedback; whether they approached feedback in the same way that they would do in everyday life, albeit unconsciously, drawing on self analysis and reflection, or whether they relied on written comments on their assessed tasks and did not consider everyday forms of feedback as relevant in an educational setting. I intended to examine the issues thought to affect student reception of feedback, and to then seek student opinion on both their experiences of the feedback they received during their courses, and their views on feedback and its scope. I also wanted to look for evidence of the relevance of cultural and social and organizational issues, and to see if there was any correlation between these variables and indeed whether any other significant factors emerged.

I carried out semi-structured interviews with individual students in the latter part of their studies from across the postgraduate courses in the Westminster Business School. These students enrolled as full-time students in either January 2007 and were completing their dissertation, or in September 2007 and were in their second semester of teaching. I based my questions on issues arising from the literature review. Findings from these interviews were used as the basis for developing a questionnaire that students in the business school were invited to complete in May 2008 during their revision sessions. This enabled the interview data to be validated and the results triangulated against both the literature and the questionnaire.

I also read the documentation and regulations provided within the University that I considered relevant to the research question and which are discussed in Chapter Two.

Conclusions

The subsequent chapters aim to provide a contextualized response to the research issue that I had posed myself. Chapter Two provides a background to postgraduate study at my university while Chapter Three presents a review of the literature relating to feedback and the factors that may affect its effectiveness, given the background and learning environment of the students being studied. Chapter Four looks in more detail at the methodology that I have used to collect my data. Chapter Five reports on the findings from the primary research and Chapter Six puts forward an evaluation of the findings in relation to the particular setting of this case study, critically analyses the research and its findings and discusses possible action for improvement and possible future studies.

CHAPTER 2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The context for this chapter is the environment against which some of the important issues relating to feedback at a national level, at a University level, and at a local level within the Westminster Business School provide the focus for this study.

University background

The University of Westminster was established in 1838 when it became Britain's first Polytechnic. It was run as a Christian college with the aim of providing technology for working people. The Hogg family developed the Polytechnic further in the early 1900s, when evening classes in applied and vocational subjects were offered, many leading to externally recognized qualifications that included preparation for external degrees of the University of London. In the 1970s and 80s the then Polytechnic of Central London had its degree programmes accredited by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). In 1992 it became a University with its own degree awarding powers. Currently the mission statement is 'to provide high quality higher education and research in both national and international contexts for the intellectual, social and professional development of the individual and for the economic and cultural enrichment of London and wider communities'.

Presently the University has over 22,000 students with approximately 25 per cent of these studying for postgraduate awards. Of these more than 4,000 are international students from over 160 overseas nations.

Academic Calendar and Course Structures

The University currently runs a three term academic year divided into two twelve week teaching semesters with students studying from September to December and January to April. The May to June period is committed to examinations, covering both semesters for undergraduates. However, postgraduate students who study modules with examinations in Semester One sit those examinations in the first week of Semester Two in January. Courses at all levels in the University are modularized and credit rated with eight modules of fifteen credits making up one Level of study.

Modularization has not been adopted in the same way across all areas of the University. In some Schools modularization means essentially that a course has been broken down into modules, whilst other Schools have taken a more open approach where apart from core modules students can choose an increasing number of electives as their courses progress. University regulations specify that students must be able to make one free choice at each level from any modules offered throughout the University.

Organisational Structure

The University moved away from a centralised financial and faculty-based structure on the appointment of a new Vice Chancellor in 1997. The current model has four campuses, three in central London and one at Harrow, with a Provost who takes overall control of all campus budgets. Each campus forms its own business unit and whilst the rationale for setting up these business units has never been totally clear it may have been based around continuation of the historical geographical location of some activities coupled with the need to balance out what were seen in 1997 as profit and loss-making activities.

Campuses have at least two schools located on each site – there are ten Schools in the University - the Marylebone Campus hosts the School of Architecture and the Built Environment, and the Westminster Business School in which this study has been carried out. Each School is headed by a Dean reporting to the campus Provost, and the Provost represents the campus on the Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group [VCEG]. Academic staff are allocated to a number of subject-based departments in each School led by a Head of Department. Currently there are five departments in the Westminster Business School. Course provisions and priorities have changed over the past decade, and with the appointment of a new Vice Chancellor in August 2007 there is a further major reorganization under way aimed at meeting the needs of the University at this particular time and moving towards greater centralization. It will be introduced at the end of the 2008/2009 academic year.

Westminster Business School

The five departments, each with a Head and around 30 full-time or equivalent staff, that comprise the Westminster Business School [WBS], result from the merger of several Schools and centres in 1997. Many teaching staff had been based in Schools where the emphasis was on undergraduate and primarily discipline-based teaching. Others came from a different culture where students were primarily postgraduate and post-experience mature students, and the teaching style was less formal and allowing greater student participation. Over time it has become more usual for staff to contribute to modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Immediately prior to the establishment of WBS two new business based masters courses were validated by the then London Management Centre: an MA in International Business and Management, and an MSc in Information and Financial Management. Essentially this was to supplement income following on from changes in HEFCE funding: it also coincided in 1992 with the polytechnic becoming a University responsible for its own debts. There was an urgent need to generate alternative income streams.

One aspect of the School business plan, devised for 1997-2002 on the establishment of the Westminster Business School, was to continue to expand full-cost postgraduate course provision. This was primarily driven by financial

need but also allowed us to exploit the far wider subject expertise that now made up the staffing in the new School. Across the five departments there was rapid expansion, both in the provision of postgraduate study in this period and the staffing levels to accommodate this. As an example, over a 5 year period the department of which I was then Head – Business Information Management & Operations - expanded from 12 to 29 full-time staff.

The success of this part of the business plan is shown by Westminster Business School currently having the largest number of postgraduate students within the University with, in the academic year 2007/08, approximately 420 students studying full-time on 15 courses leading to an MA or MSc. Of those who first enrolled in September 2007, 259 are classified as full-time overseas students and 53 as home students – about 83 per cent overseas. It is from this enrolment group of 312 full-time students that the interviews for the current research have been conducted. These numbers exclude those enrolled on the MBA programme since it has a slightly different format, and also all part-time postgraduate students.

The Student Experience

When students initially enroll on one of the above courses they attend a period of induction. At this time they are given a 'Postgraduate Handbook of General Information' pertinent to their courses. This provides information about the University and the regulations for studying at master's level, details of assessment methods, and how students are expected to study; however, no

mention is made of feedback other than in relation to assessment and the timescales to which students can expect staff to adhere. This is very much a mirror image of references to feedback at University level.

At both School and Campus level there are a number of student support services available. Within WBS there is specific support for postgraduate students with an administrator able to provide day-to-day information and to make bookings for particular services such as seeing counsellors. There has also been a Literary Fellowship for the academic sessions 2008, and 2009. Both services report to the Senior Personal Tutor – a member of academic staff - responsible for support for all students on campus, and a post required by the University. The ways in which these services and roles are resourced and operated have changed several times during the past five years, but the appointment of the fellow has enabled collection of some meaningful data on student needs. At a course level each course leader provides immediate tutorial support, and all members of staff in WBS are required to be available for a two hour slot when students can see them each week. The latter is not totally satisfactory as these timeslots may be when students are not on campus, or at classes.

Each postgraduate course has a small fund allocated by the Dean to enable social activities to be arranged: during induction students are generally taken on at least one visit in London, and there are some socials or meals arranged,

particularly for new and continuing students to meet. Attendance at these is usually high.

Quality in Course Provision

One of the responsibilities of the Head of Department is accountability for the academic standards of work within that Department. At the time that I commenced my IFS, I was concerned about the number of staff who primarily had undergraduate teaching experience, and were being required to deliver modules and develop new work at postgraduate level. This raised queries for me about staff awareness on a number of issues. Amongst these were, firstly, the differences related to delivery of modules on a one year rather than a three year programme of study: secondly, whether the provision of assessment and teaching was at an appropriate level: thirdly, the need for staff to be aware of the differing background and expectations of students enrolling onto postgraduate courses, and the differences between the full and part-time cohorts. At a departmental and a school level staff development sessions did take place, but it was with these types of issues in mind that I chose to look at formative assessment on the department's postgraduate courses for my IFS. One of the recommendations from my IFS (2006 p75) was 'for the need to improve the quality of the verbal and written feedback given on assignments', and one of the findings, 'that students do not take advantage of the methods of feedback available to them during module delivery' moves the focus from

researching course delivery issues to investigating students' opinions and experiences on one of these issues: feedback.

Context of Student Learning within the University of Westminster

In the context of the University, feedback comes within the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy and Strategy, with the current policy document covering 2006-2009. When the devolved policies and plans are detailed as school action plans there are no specific targets in relation to research into this area of pedagogy.

Dissemination of good practice in pedagogic issues is the remit of the University Educational Initiative Centre (EIC) and through the network of school-based teaching and learning co-ordinators. As well as staff development sessions the EIC puts out a number of guides, of which one is called 'Learning from Feedback' (2005).

Whilst these documents are still valid, it was in 2007 that the first results from the National Student Survey were published. In relation to feedback the results of this survey were disappointing across the whole sector. However, these results have initiated a greater emphasis on aspects of feedback within the University of Westminster, and are discussed later in this chapter.

Management of the Teaching Year

I believe it is important to describe the management and format of the teaching year in order to provide a backdrop against which to view this research. From the standpoint of the academic staff, my IFS (2006 p73) revealed that there is a general feeling that timing of exam boards and administrative necessity predominate in any reviews of the teaching year that have taken place.

Reflecting on administrative patterns prior to modularization and semesterization I am in agreement with these reservations about where our 'priorities' are: despite decentralization of much day-to-day organization to a campus level the requirements related to course operation, and planning the yearly calendar, continue to be managed centrally. Some campuses, Marylebone included, have adopted modularization in a more open way than others. This may give an erroneous idea of decentralization whereas in fact there is central management control and any local practices have to fit within the defined framework. For example, students in the business school have a greater choice over the modules that they take than they did when study was course based, whereas some of the other campuses have chosen simply to modularize their course giving minimal choice, and this tends to make for simpler administration and a different student experience. However, allowing this approach but retaining a 'one size fits all' management approach prohibits provision of the most appropriate methods at local/course levels.

In the Westminster Business School postgraduate modules run for two twelve week teaching terms. Within this period full-time students study four modules and part-timers two modules a semester with each module weighted at fifteen credits. The numbers taking these modules can vary greatly, with some core modules being run across several courses with around a hundred students, and other course specific or specialist options being run for groups of between 10 and 20 students. However, any one group of students may contain students who are in either the first or second semester of study, and core modules are not always taught in the same specific order. This can make module delivery very complicated for the lecturer. All modules must, in order to meet University requirements, have 2 elements of assessment. Each will have in-course assessment set, with a requirement that it is marked and returned to students within three weeks of the submission date. This effectively limits the topics that can be set to the first part of the module, since work must be submitted by teaching week nine at the latest, and students must have received the work four weeks prior to that. Despite attempts at a course level to stagger submission dates, it has proved virtually impossible given modularization, shared modules, and the tight semester timescales. In reality the majority of students are working on at least three assignments at about the same time, so are put under some pressure. In-course assessments are both formative and summative, whilst end-of-module assessments are effectively summative as they are not returned until after students have completed the module, and if there is an exam

then papers are retained by teaching staff. Students may however seek a tutorial where they can discuss their exam paper.

WBS requirements are that assessments weighted above 30 per cent must be double marked before being returned to students and all scripts must have individual written feedback, either within the text or on the front sheet, or both. The double-marking requirements put a considerable strain on staff running large modules, and almost certainly reduce the written feedback provided. It has been school policy not to read draft assignments prior to submission.

Postgraduate students sit their first semester exams during the first teaching week in January. End-of-module assessment may be coursework or an exam: if it is coursework this is handed in on the first day of term in January. For these students the second set of modules commences in week two of semester two.

Postgraduate students are required to achieve 50% over their two pieces of assessed work on a module. Resit coursework is submitted by a given date either the next time the module runs, which may be in the following semester, or prior to the resit exams at the end of the summer term. All resit examinations are taken at the end of June/July. Students receive a percentage mark for both coursework and examination.

Between May and July postgraduate students take their second semester exams and work on their projects if they enrolled in September. Those enrolling in January are offered one of their core modules during the 'Summer School' period and they also take the Research Methods module at this time so that in their final semester full-time students only study three modules and so have more time to concentrate on their project work. Students do receive individual written and face-to-face feedback on their project proposals and parts of their draft, but some students do not take advantage of the latter – probably because they leave the writing of their project until the very last moment.

This type of local arrangement is a clear indicator that a 'one size fits all' to the college year approach does not work for everyone. Westminster Business School is the only school in the University that has a January entry point, and the needs of the latter have not been taken fully into consideration with the current structure, especially as enrolment in the Business School is between 20-25% of total University enrolment. It is worth adding that after operating for three years a revised academic calendar is currently under discussion and in 2008/09 teaching time will be reduced to 10 weeks, exacerbating the pressure of assignment completion for students, and marking for staff.

A recent study by Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet (2007), who are critics of modular schemes and too much variety in assessment, investigated whether different

assessment regimes affected student learning, and their study indicated that institutional differences both affect assessment practices and in turn impact on student learning. Therefore, it is essential that the underlying organization of the student year and each University's regulations and administrative practices should form a background to investigations of any aspect of the student learning cycle. This makes case study research a very pertinent approach when investigating pedagogic issues.

The above description does perhaps illustrate the feelings of academic staff that regulations and management take precedence and have essentially constrained the ways in which modules can be delivered, and perhaps lead to what Carless (2006) called 'fulfilment of a ritual' (p220) in relation to provision of feedback. However, personal experience of external examining in other new universities has provided similar experiences, and concurs with what Yorke (1998) suggested: that 'institutions from the former polytechnics and colleges sector tend to have strong managerial linkages 'down' from the senior management team' (p104). This probably gives individual staff less autonomy in module delivery, certainly the case at Westminster. In order to satisfy organizational and administrative demands it may be that the student and staff experience is not sufficiently considered and the social aspects of learning are being overlooked. Perhaps this is due to the make-up of some of the committees where such

decisions are made, with administrative and service staff outnumbering academics. Thus a different set of priorities predominates.

One of the other effects of modularization can be, as in the case of Westminster Business School, fragmentation because students are taking modules that cross departmental barriers. It is quite possible as Mutch (2002) suggests that any course begins to lose its coherence. The student experience is viewed from a module rather than a course perspective. This could well lead to confusion for the student, who may see a lack of continuity in the teaching. The feedback that is available to them may well be contradictory, with staff from different departments having a range of requirements and expectations for the student. However, I believe this is minimised at postgraduate level as all courses in the Business School are primarily departmentally based; of course, individual staff still have individual requirements for the submitted work!

The organization of the timetable at campus level is also a point to be mentioned. Each module is allocated three hours teaching per week and this is generally a 1.5 hour lecture followed by a 1.5 hour seminar. At postgraduate level this is almost certainly a lecture followed by a seminar. Whilst this arrangement does mean students do not have to be in college every day, three hours sessions may be too intensive for some students especially where English

is not their first language. It also means students may only have one opportunity in the week to discuss and clarify their learning with their tutors.

Feedback at a National Level

In the academic year (2006/07) the first National Student Survey [NSS] was published. Results of this survey showed that 'It is students' single biggest gripe, and universities are rapidly waking up to the fact that if they want to enhance that all-important 'student experience' their lecturers must provide better feedback' Tahir (2008). This same article continued by saying that 'only 54 per cent agreed that feedback had been prompt and had helped to clarify points they did not understand'. Within Westminster as a whole 46 per cent of students felt feedback had been prompt and in the Business School 44 per cent. In response to a question related to provision of detailed comments 60 per cent nationally said they did receive detailed comments, but in the University this went down to 56 per cent and to 46 per cent in the Business School, considerably below the response for the sector. Asked if comments had helped to clarify understanding, nationally 54 per cent of the overall respondents agreed, whilst 51 per cent agreed in Westminster but only 44 per cent in the Business School. Results of this survey have been quoted widely and are used for comparisons in University league tables, and feedback has been one area picked out for notice because as Attwood (2008) states 'Studies have shown feedback to be the most influential, but also the most neglected, teaching practice', and goes on in the same article

to quote Gibbs, 'that adequate and timely feedback is now an endangered species in many contexts'.

Subsequent NSS surveys will provide percentage changes against each question so understandably universities are anxious to improve on their results year on year, hence increased interest at University level to look at how feedback is dealt with, and ensure that no one school is scoring below the norm for the University. During the current academic year there has been a memo from the University NSS Steering Group that reiterates the requirements of the Academic regulations as of August 2007 and emphasizes the need for organizational regulations related to provision of feedback. There is no mention of issues related to the improvement of the quality of that feedback. These requirements are shown in part in Appendix A.

There is a number of groups across the UK now taking an interest in assessment and feedback and making proposals for improvement. Among them the Weston Group, part of the Oxford Brookes based Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange, [ASKe] who have provided 'Assessment standards: a manifesto for change', with one of the recommendations that emphasis should be 'to develop assessment and feedback processes that engage staff and students in dialogue about standards'. ASKe itself presented a paper to the Higher Education

Academy in 2007 suggesting that the following points made for more effective assessment:

- the purpose of the feedback is clear;
- feedback is provided where students can use it in future work;
- the feedback accounts for the transfer of tacit as well as explicit knowledge about standards and disciplinary knowledge;
- and the student perceives some sort of relationship with the marker.

The Higher Education Academy itself has been funding projects related to the assessment and feedback process, one of which, the SENLEF project is discussed in Chapter Three, as well as running conferences on the feedback process, - May 2006 and April 2008.

This gives a brief indication of how feedback, primarily in association with assessment, has currently become a pedagogic area of great interest to higher education, and how it makes any findings that I may be able to report at a local level within my own teaching situation particularly pertinent.

My own role and interest in the research

At the commencement of this study I was Head of the Business Information Management & Operations Department within the Westminster Business School and a member of the School Management Group. In summer 2006 I stepped down from this role and am currently working as a principal lecturer on a fractional appointment within the same department. As a Head I had responsibility for academic standards and the quality of work that emanated from

the department and in this role I had, and still do have, an interest in the characteristics of the students who enroll onto our full-cost courses and how these characteristics, attitudes and expectations may impact on our teaching, learning and assessment methods. This is more than ever pertinent now as the School is extending the scope of its courses to post experience work for external clients. As a postgraduate module leader I am eager to work to improve the effectiveness of my own teaching and believe that a wider picture of students' attitudes and their perceptions on feedback can help me to do this. Where any type of pedagogical research is undertaken it is of little value if it is not disseminated to people who may find it useful or who can at least discuss and comment on it. In this instance I see the community of practice as an internal one made up of the postgraduate lecturing staff in the Westminster Business School and I would hope that the results of this research can be shared with them and may lead to reflection and adaptation in the delivery of our courses.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide the context for the research question I have posed, as well as an explanation of why this particular question is of interest to me. It has also noted why feedback as a topic is of especial interest in tertiary education at the present time; and, given the differences in institutional regulations and course delivery methods, why any consideration of this topic needs in some part to be undertaken at a local level. The picture provided by a description of the current academic year and current regulations relating to

course structure and delivery indicates a situation where the emphasis is on satisfactory management and administration of the academic year and the organization, over and above provision of a calendar that permits academic staff to address each aspect of the student learning cycle in a satisfactory way. The main points of concern that emerge from this chapter when linked to perceived good practice in relation to feedback that are discussed in Chapter Three are:

- No marking of drafts [except projects]
- Double marking requirements and turnaround times that may inhibit adequate written feedback
- The norm of written comments as feedback
- The dichotomy of course-based or modular focus
- Structure of the academic year and its effect on teaching and assessment schedules
- Possible impact of modularization on the feedforward effect, and lack of course coherence
- Diversity of student intake at postgraduate level.

It is possible that some or all of these aspects inhibit both provision of good feedback and its reception by our students. In research by Gibbs & Dunbat-Goddet (2007) it was found that 'the modern assessment environment in a teaching-oriented institution was found to be associated with less positive learning responses' and with 'very low levels of formative-only assessment and oral feedback, with clear specification of goals and standards and aligned curricula' (p26). These statements would seem to epitomize the situation at Westminster. Chapter Three reviews literature in the areas that may impact on feedback within the context described in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter aims to review the literature in order to provide an understanding of the essentials of the feedback process and its place in the learning cycle as well as what are considered essential elements of good quality feedback. Factors influencing that learning environment and which can affect feedback, plus particular issues postgraduate international students may experience are reviewed: these include previous educational background, alongside the cultural and linguistic differences students bring to the learning environment and the consequences of organizational and management constraints on teaching and feedback are also explored. All link to the objectives outlined on page 28. My definition of feedback, as discussed in Chapter One, is any information that can be obtained from the variety of sources available to a student, which is understood and received by that student, aids learning and performance, and provides opportunities for improvement and development of learning. Whilst feedback is recognized as a two-way process the focus of this study is on the student perspective of feedback.

I have used the review as one of the means of providing a basis to formulate questions for the student interviews and my subsequent questionnaire which form the main means of primary data collection for this study.

PEDAGOGIC ASPECTS OF FEEDBACK

In addressing some of the principle issues they believed to be central to the whole debate surrounding feedback some writers have provided their definitions on the topic and suggested ways of classifying feedback, mostly with the aim of improving its use in a classroom setting with primary and secondary pupils.

Frequently, where results of the tasks carried out with students are analysed, the tasks themselves are principally iterative; this allows for retesting at intervals, or draft submission of essays, and are generally carried out with school age students. This is quite unlike the situation in WBS where staff have been discouraged from reviewing drafts and there is no iteration in assessment within individual modules. Much of the writing discusses how the form of feedback affects reception by the learner, a significant factor for my own case study. If by accepting that learning dispositions are developed over the course of an individual's schooling and general experience by the time a group of students enrolls on a postgraduate course they are likely to have established learning dispositions developed from their previous studying experiences

Essentials for Effective Feedback

As previously mentioned, one of the first writers to put forward his views on feedback was Sadler (1989) who was primarily concerned in his paper about 'the lack of a general theory of feedback and formative assessment in complex

learning settings' (p119). He also asserted good feedback did not always result in improvements in the quality of student work which he suggests could be due to general deficiencies in teaching systems. Throughout the 1989 article he refers to the aim for individual students to move from a reliance on feedback, which is always external, to one where they control their own output and become independent learners, akin to the self regulated learning of Butler & Winne (1995) and self-referenced feedback of Shute (2007). However, I would question the concept that feedback is always external: students will only become self-regulated learners through ability to reflect and evaluate their own learning and work.

Sadler maintains that whether it is a physical, intellectual or social skill 'most require practice in a supportive environment which incorporates feedback loops,' (Sadler 1989 p120). He emphasizes that in learning, such as manual tasks or media work, students gain feedback through seeing results from other students and through teacher's evaluation of their work. This would be true for some modules in WBS, in particular software development or systems design, or assessment where groups work on business problems, for example in project management, and make a group presentation of their solution. However, much of the work at postgraduate level falls into the category where Sadler suggests that students work privately and see little of others output with individuals aspiring to quality levels that can remain largely unknown to them. I feel this is

an important area to investigate with students that I interview; do they understand what they are aiming at, what quality is? Skyrme's study (2007) of Chinese students looked in depth at one student who eventually failed his course, perhaps because 'I have no point about what is the lecturer want us to catch, you know, because heaps of notes and she just give us the outline about that stuff and I don't know which part I should to focus on' (p66): a good example of working in isolation with no understood goals.

Importantly for Sadler the student must know what constitutes quality; he suggests this relies on appreciating the teachers' 'conceptions of quality'. He likens this to tacit knowledge or 'guild knowledge' (1989 p126), and points out this concept will almost certainly vary from teacher to teacher. However, (1989) 'guild knowledge keeps the concept of the standard relatively inaccessible to the learner, and tends to maintain the learner's dependence on the teacher for judgments about the quality of performance' (p127), a point reinforced by what Lillis (2001) calls 'an institutional practice of mystery' (p58). This tacit idea of quality may be a problem for students in the business school since they may be taught by as many as eight staff and encounter as many concepts of quality. Sadler (1998) suggests 'learners often have little on which to base expectations about what should be delivered' (p83) in other words what a quality or standard should be: therefore, it is erroneous to assume that (1998) 'when students are 'given feedback' they will know what to do with it' (p78). Over time Sadler has

developed his views on how students can be helped to improve their work in complex learning situations, but he still emphasizes (2009) the need for students to be taught to recognize what a quality product is, believing this can only be achieved when a student has the pre-requisite knowledge, the tacit knowledge, that allows him/her to find meaning in the feedback they receive. Students in the business school may very well be uncertain about the quality levels required, rather like the Chinese students studied in Skyrme's 2007 work, and quoted above, and it is important to follow this area up in the interviews.

Apart from recognizing a quality product a student needs to compare their current performance with this standard, that is analyse the gap. What Ramaprasad (1983) denotes as the 'reference level' (p4) which is used to alter this gap in some way. This demands the student can evaluate whether that work will reach that standard: thus a student must make 'multicriteria judgments about their own work' (1989, p130) and also make them 'with a proper degree of objectivity and detachment'. There is a resemblance here to Vygotsky's (1978) 'zone of proximal development' where he talks of advancing the student from current problem-solving abilities to more complex issues through provision of feedback: in other words in collaborative learning between the teacher and student: hardly possible in the large lecture and seminar groups currently timetabled in WBS. A similar viewpoint is taken by Boud and Falchikov (2006 p 401) that 'through provision of information about responsesstudents are

enabled to more effectively judge their own achievements and what they need to do to learn more effectively within the program.’ Rather than feedback being an external process as Sadler suggests these higher level skills of evaluation, problem-solving and judgment require active involvement on the part of the student to strengthen their work.

This point is extremely relevant to my study. I am not aware of any teaching staff making available examples of quality work to help students recognize quality standards. There would be considerable cynicism, I imagine, about providing what might be seen as a ‘model answer’. Draft submission of assignments is discouraged, so a student does not get a chance to amend work following some initial feedback – in other words to practice - and each piece of work requires a response to different learning outcomes.

Lastly, Sadler stresses the learner must take actions that will in some way close the gap between actual and required levels when he discusses Ramaprasad’s definition; in effect if the feedback provided as a statement, exemplar or grade is accessible to the learner. He also queries (2009) whether students are likely to have a real understanding of the concepts often used in assessment criteria: for example the *cogency* of an argument or what is meant by *efficiency* in relation to product design, and believes this will affect a student’s ability to understand feedback and close the gap. There is an acknowledgement in his writing that

the context in which the student is learning is one constructed by others, and the environment in which learning takes place does matter and this links to the wider perspective I have adopted on how students may experience feedback. Sadler's early papers were written before the introduction of modular schemes so the suggestion that working individually with students would tease out their understanding of the feedback provided was still a realistic proposition.

Being actively involved and motivated in what you are learning to do and being able to make accurate judgments about how well you are doing it are both crucial to making progress according to Sadler, whether that means getting better at a task, or evaluating and analysing a situation or a viewpoint: these views are supported by (Crooks 2001; Harlen & James 1996; Hattie 1999; Black & William 1998). Such tasks imply an essential for Ivanic, Clark & Rimmershaw (2000), in that any feedback must be internalised and interpreted by the student if remedial action is to take place, and if, over time, that student is to become a self-directed learner: in itself a constructivist approach requiring some skills in self-assessment. This is a skill that Boud (2000) argues needs to be developed early in a student's education, as it is also essential that feedback is recognized. For example whilst lecturers may think that they have provided oral feedback, perhaps through repetition of, or recapping, the main points of a lecture, there is evidence that 'students may not recognize this form of feedback as much as written comments', (Carless 2006 p223). Evidence suggests that assumptions

that students are not involved in their learning may be wrong, the reality may be that they are being provided with a plethora of views as to what they should be doing and are thus unable to put the feedback they receive into a meaningful context, something to provide a focus in the interviews with students in the business school.

Self-Regulated Learning

Butler and Winne (1995) positioned feedback 'within a model of self-regulation that guides cognitive activities during which knowledge is accreted, tuned, and restructured' (1995 p246). The authors believed that self regulation makes for the most effective learners, and suggest that self-regulated students are 'aware of qualities of their own knowledge, beliefs, motivation, and cognitive processing' (1995 p245), which they then use to monitor how well their current procedures equate with standards they believe they need for success - 'self-regulated learning is a deliberate, judgmental, adaptive process,' with feedback as an intrinsic stimulus for change. Evidence indicates that if feedback comes from an external source it has greater effectiveness, (see Bangert-Drowns Kulik et al, 1991; Kulhavy & Stock 1989). However, Butler and Winne (1995) acknowledge that students generally receive feedback either after the learning has taken place or assessment is completed so the purpose becomes one of confirming or changing knowledge exhibited in their work, rather than one of guidance during the work, and that 'outcome feedback, the most common kind of information students receive after engaging in academic tasks, provides the least guidance on how to self-regulate' (Butler and Winne 1995 p252).

Butler and Winne's views on self-regulated learning link to Sadler's viewpoint that the aim of feedback is over time to enable a student to evaluate and make judgments on their own work. By placing it as self-regulated learning for any

individual there is an immediate feeling that the process is likely to be iterative or recursive, not a one-off event, and have some affective influence overall, and their model of self-regulated learning stresses this recursiveness, as shown in Figure 2 below

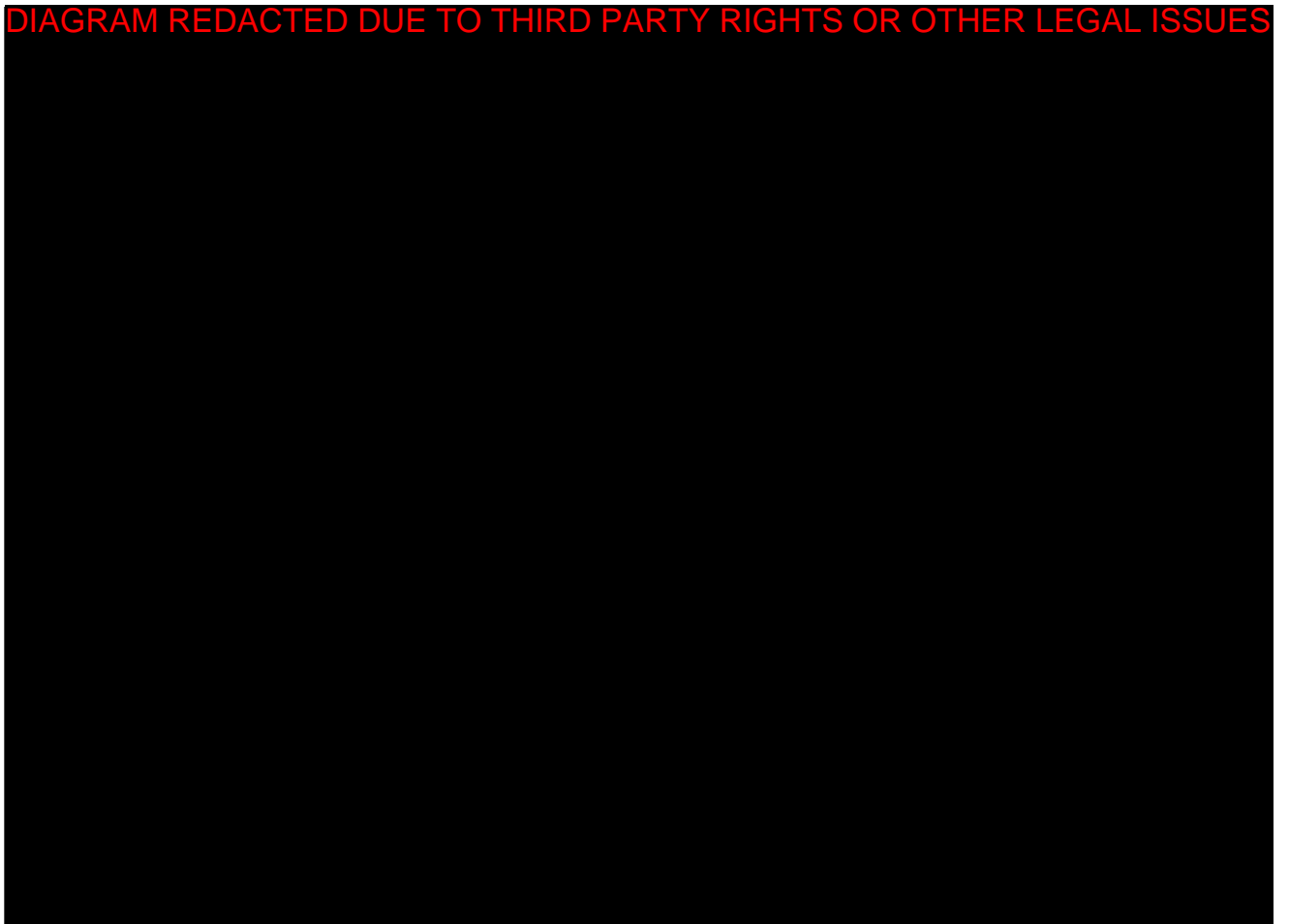


Figure 2 A model of self-regulated learning (Butler & Winne 1995 p248)

PAGE
NUMBERING
AS ORIGINAL

This is very much the situation that currently exists within WBS, where students receive little or no feedback in the narrowest senses until after assessment tasks are completed. Since the onus is then on students to follow up on any comments they have received one would have to consider them self-regulated learners, even if they have not been given guidance in this skill.

This more integrative approach is extended through Butler and Winne's agreement (see also Chinn and Brewer 1993; Schommer 1990, 1993; Balzer 1989) that students in both secondary and post-secondary education do have epistemological views related to learning, including emotional control strategies, which can act as a filter, and may distort the way in which tasks are initially viewed, or goals understood, and any feedback received. This reference to individual beliefs may well be important to students at Westminster, with from different cultures, and writing in their second language, so goals may be doubly difficult for them to clarify. The model Butler and Winne put forward demonstrates the importance of receiving cues [feedback] that are given and how they are processed, as much as the domain understanding of each individual.

I find some synergy in this aspect of the article to my own research in that a wider set of factors are touched on suggesting a student's prior knowledge and beliefs does affect how that student experiences feedback and to think of feedback simply as information provided is insufficient: (Butler & Winnie 1985)

'learners interpret such information according to reasonably stable and relatively potent systems of beliefs concerning subject areas, learning processes, and the products of learning. These beliefs influence both students' perceptions of cues, their generation of internal feedback, and their processing of externally provided feedback', (p254). Of course, it may also be a student does see the cues, but being a self-regulated learner implies setting personal goals which may cause him/her to ignore these cues: Boekaerts (1999) suggests these goals will serve two major functions, 'namely directing behavior toward the end-states that they [the student] specify and monitoring standards for the evaluation of ongoing activities' (p456). To me this could show active involvement but a decision to interpret cues in a way which the feedback provider had not intended. The Butler & Winnie (1985) paper recognizes a student's learning disposition will affect how s/he approaches any self-regulation: it adds weight to Sadler's work by stressing learners must be actively involved in what they are doing but also includes the need for development of internal feedback skills and shows how self-regulation leads to the development of a more effective learner.

Feedback Interventions

Kluger and DeNisi (1996) based research around feedback interventions (FIs) and challenged the view that they were consistent in improving performance. In this respect they were in line with Sadler (1989) and Butler & Winne (1995) and Boekaerts (1999) with the proposal that providing apparently adequate feedback would not necessarily result in better work. Kluger & DeNisi (1996) defined FIs as 'actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance' (1996 p255). That is knowledge of results which could include performance indicators and comments on how you perform. The types of tasks around which the paper is based include 'task performance, memory tasks, physical tasks, attendance behaviour', not the higher level functions that are required at postgraduate level. There is evidence that with more complex tasks some types of FIs are less effective. It is worth noting that much of their own research was not classroom based and would not therefore be considered ecologically valid.

The most interesting aspect of this paper from the perspective of my own study is the writers' meta-analysis on reported findings showing the variable effects of FIs on performance. They found that whilst FIs can improve performance there are some examples where they have little or no effect, or even a negative one: indeed one-third of FIs actually decrease performance levels: an unexpected example being praise which, perhaps surprisingly, tends to show negative future improvement.

Their analysis led the authors to propose a feedback intervention theory (FIT) which took a broader approach than they had found in their literature review, and included variables such as praise, task novelty and complexity. Based on their review findings they suggest that FIs do affect a learner's performance because they change the locus of attention, and FIs are more effective when they focus on task issues rather than self which can be viewed as threatening and need to be directed to the gap between actual and desired performance, a link to the views of Sadler (1989) and Butler & Winne (1995). With postgraduate students the type of comment that refers to lack of evaluation or critical analysis may be seen as suggesting a lack of ability and therefore threaten the self, since this type of comment is essentially generalised, rather than goal focused.

Kluger and DeNisi (1996) also discuss whether feedback is always beneficial: 'researchers and practitioners alike confuse their feelings that feedback is desirable with the question of whether FI benefits performance' (p277). This might indicate that 'feedback may increase satisfaction (Fried & Ferris 1987) and contribute to long-range persistence on the focal task', although this is an unstudied variable. To me, this belief equates well with my own working situation, where feedback is always considered necessary, implying it is always good: in fact no discussion has taken place at more than an informal level as to which aspects may be useful to the learner and which may have a neutral or negative impact.

In their paper Kluger & deNisi (1996) have expanded the thinking on feedback to accentuate the need not simply for goal oriented comments, but also for consideration of tone and approach: a clear assumption that the social aspects of learning should be considered. I think they provide a useful focus and checklist for any teacher, which is more manageable than the lists that Shute (2007) later devised.

Guidelines for Formative Feedback

Shute (2007) carried out a comprehensive literature review into formative feedback aiming to formulate a set of guidelines that would be pertinent under differing circumstances. She asserted that feedback is 'generally regarded as crucial to improving knowledge and skill acquisition' (p1) and a 'significant factor in motivating learning', with the main aim being (p5) 'to modify the learner's thinking or behaviour for the purpose of improving learning,' but the main focus of her paper is that the feedback message is correctly delivered.

Shute seeks to provide evidence of the most powerful and effective forms of feedback and discusses their main features which she sees as timing, complexity, verification, where the feedback makes a judgment on whether the answer is correct, and elaboration, where some additional explanatory information is provided: like Kluger & DeNisi (1996) she finds it preferable if it is response specific, not self-orientated. Results indicate where too much complexity comes into the feedback the message may be weakened and/or the recipient may disregard it. The need for goal-oriented feedback is discussed: 'for a learner to remain motivated and engaged depends upon a close match between a learner's goals and expectations that these goals can be met.' Too high a goal may discourage whilst an easily attainable one may result in little effort, and there are implications that formative feedback can modify the learner's goals – a link to Sadler's (1989) hard and soft goals.

The choice of timing feedback needs to relate to the task and capability of the learner and no clear advantage can be found for either immediate or delayed feedback. This is interesting in that Gibbs & Simpson (2004) stress the need for timely or immediate feedback, whereas some evidence exists that delayed feedback may be better at promoting transfer of learning, and in particular where concept formation tasks are required. It is applicable to my own research where concept formation and transfer of learning will be important for much of the assessed work that students have to complete, but my own institution currently sets timing of written feedback requirements as the only criteria for its provision and they do not occur as part of the process but after the event.

The view that feedback should signal a gap in learning and aim to reduce uncertainty on performance, and aspire to elicit greater motivation and better task oriented strategies links with the gap analysis position, already discussed, by Sadler (1989); Butler & Winne (1995); Kluger & deNisi (1996); and Black & William (2005).

The concept of scaffolding as a 'cognitive support mechanism' (Shute, p13) is introduced as a supportive way of closing any learning/performance gap over time: with formative feedback providing a framework for students to learn. This is pertinent to my own case study, where I can see that we expect higher level functions from our postgraduate students immediately they begin their studies

without providing the scaffolding to help them achieve either a change to a higher level of study or the skills to achieve this change.

Shute (2007) puts all her material together to present a set of tables of formative feedback guidelines classified as things to do, and to avoid, timing, and learner characteristics, and goes on to propose areas for future research. One of these is learner characteristics, and the need for a more multi-dimensional approach when considering feedback, very much what my own definition attempts to do.

What materializes from the writing overall is that there is no one method of providing formative feedback which will always work; these are only pointers to success since learners are motivated by different things. On the basis of this paper looking beyond feedback to my intention to investigate the social and organizational issues that provide the background to student learning appears timely and relevant.

The Process of Feedback

Hattie and Timperley (2007) review findings in the literature to present a model which they consider aids the way feedback can be used in teaching and learning situations in the classroom and with assessment. This is one of the few papers addressing the issue of feedback in classroom situations. The writers differentiate between providing instruction and providing feedback although they consider that when shared with a correctional approach 'feedback and instruction become intertwined' (2007, p82) until "the process itself takes on the forms of new instruction rather than informing the student solely about correctness" (Kuhlavy 1977, p212)'. This supports part of my argument that repetition and recapping in lectures and seminars are helpful to the feedback process. Recapping is I think more effective if the material is presented in a slightly different way from the first time: this can aid some students and can also clarify parts of lectures or seminars that were not totally understood and help to provide a 'big picture' of a topic.

Hattie's (1999) analysis of effective feedback found that there were more than 100 factors influencing educational achievement, these included schools, homes and the curriculum, and reinforce my own view that there are factors outside of the classroom that probably play a part in the experience and acceptance of feedback by any one student. As with Shute (2007), Butler & Winnie (1995) and Kluger & deNisi ((1996) they make the point that 'feedback is not necessarily

a reinforcer; it can be accepted, modified, or rejected. Feedback by itself may not have the power to initiate further action,' (p82).

In their summary of feedback effects Hattie and Timperley's (2007) findings correlate with those of the other writers previously discussed, indicating that cues, reinforcement, and feedback related to goals were the most effective forms of feedback whilst those that provided extrinsic rewards since they 'undermine people's taking responsibility for motivating or regulating themselves' (p83) tended to have a negative impact: and 'feedback through comments alone led to learning gains, whereas marks alone or comments accompanied by marks or giving praise did not' (p92), links to Kluger & DeNisi's (1996) findings.

The framework for the model Hattie and Timperley put forward is based around questions: Where am I going?, which is goal oriented. How am I going?, which is feedback oriented; and, Where to next? which is feed forward oriented. All aimed, as with previous writers, at reducing the gap between current and desired performance. Interestingly, throughout the paper the student's choice of rejecting feedback or adapting it to suit themselves is emphasised; they 'may abandon goals', 'they may choose to blur the goals, combining them'or 'change the standard by setting less challenging goals, accepting performance far below their capabilities as satisfactory,' (p87). This links to the Butler & Winne (1995) view that self-regulated learning does not always lead to acceptance of the tutor's standards with Hattie & Timperley (2007) believing

'teachers and parents often assume that students share a commitment to academic goals, whereas the reality is that developing this shared commitment needs to be nurtured and built.' (p87) I suspect that most academics assume students want to achieve to their best ability but I have no evidence from Westminster on which to base this belief.

This paper provides greater discussion than I found elsewhere around feedback related to process: 'a deep understanding of learning involves the construction of meaning (understanding) and relates more to the relationships, cognitive processes, and transference to other more difficult or untried tasks' (p93). The writers assert a major area of process feedback 'relates to students' strategies for error detection, thus providing self feedback (p93). The suggestion is made that process feedback linked with goal setting helps students develop task strategies and tends towards deeper learning than task feedback: reinforcing the views of the writers argued earlier.

The level of feedback self-regulation draws heavily on the views of Butler and Winne (1995) but also suggests that how far a student will be willing to invest effort may depend on what they perceive as the transaction costs – effort, face [an evaluation of the effect of how others will perceive an individual who seeks feedback] and inference [what implications are there if feedback is wrongly interpreted]: these costs may be prohibitive to some people in terms of the imagined value and so feedback may be dismissed. This paper considers

feedback from a cultural perspective, with evidence that 'students from collectivist cultures preferred indirect and implicit feedback, more group-focused feedback, and no self-level feedback. Students from individualist cultures preferred more direct feedback particularly related to effort, were more likely to use direct inquiry to seek feedback, and preferred more individual focused self-related feedback' (p100). This is pertinent to my study because of the broader view I am taking on feedback and the diversity of students studying on our postgraduate programmes.

Learning Transitions and Autonomous Learning

All the above researchers have used various techniques to show that to be successful feedback has to show the student how to bridge the gap between their current standards of work and the standard they should be seeking if they wish to improve. In recent years there are examples of universities developing various support methods to help students make transitions in their learning, and indeed transitions from one level of study to another.

An example is given by Davis & Yeang (2008) who detail several instances of programmes to help students develop their academic literacy. (McGowan 2005, Johnson and Clereham (2005) Emerson et al (2005)). Davis herself used a series of questions in a pre-Master's writing module to 'engage students more actively in their own learning and their development of academic literacy' (p3) and 'to promote greater independence and self-sufficiency'. Turnitin was used in a formative way, enabling students to be shown the minutiae of 'appropriate paraphrasing, copying quotations accurately, and avoiding plagiarism' for example. This method resulted in positive improvements on redrafts, and showed students ways of closing the gap between their current knowledge levels and the levels required.

One study (Perdigones et al 2009) was aimed at students taking options where their main subjects were very diverse, for example law or engineering. The pilot took place in two very different Spanish universities: firstly, where students took

a final exam and were given their overall grade, there was no feedback: secondly, where the final grade was an amalgam of continuous assessment and an exam. The pilot allowed each student to choose a specialist topic on which they wrote a guided project which was weighted at 60% of the total for that module. According to Perdigones et al this 'developed skills such as 'autonomy, the ability to search for information, work analysis, the writing of a final document, critical assessment, exhibition skills and oral communication' (p398), the students found the grades were fair, 'assessment was more objective and learning, too rarely occurs, and needs to be more fully researchedin the classroom and learning process' (p104). Since feedback is seen as integral to the learning process, and results from it, it is important at this point to briefly consider the learning cycle within which feedback plays such a crucial role.

THE LEARNING CYCLE

If feedback does happen second in the learning process, then central to any discussion on feedback is the way in which people learn. Learning takes place through acquiring facts and behaviours which may include all or some amongst knowledge, understanding, values and skills and which will lead to a change in behaviour. The way in which students learn will be 'through reading, thinking, writing, listening to others and notetaking, observing, talking to and with others and doing things', (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury 1997, p2), not just listening in lectures or seminars. If students learn by these methods then they get feedback through these methods. The processes involve 'various forms of thinking which may include looking for understanding, evaluative and analytical thinking, and trying to solve problems, but may also be through rote learning, constructing patterns and making associations in what has been learnt' (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury 1997, p2). It is partly through these last two points that I believe recapping deserves to be considered with feedback: it may enable students to make patterns and associations in their learning by reviews of lecture content by the lecturer, and put the total content of the lecture into perspective. I think this may be especially true for students who are studying in a foreign language.

In participating in learning a student may tend to one of two principle orientations, leaning towards knowledge seeking, or leaning towards understanding Entwistle (1991). All of these learning processes can be improved with feedback as already discussed. Whatever the preferred form of learning, some will, according to Marton (1988) and Ramsden (1992), approach

how they learn in a way which attempts to focus on the whole in relation to the parts, as opposed to breaking up the whole and focusing on various parts of the subject. Equally some will prefer in *what* they learn to focus on the surface level whilst others will take a deep approach trying to understand the author's intentions. This is evidenced by Skyrme (2007) in her investigation of Chinese students' adaptations to an undergraduate business studies course in New Zealand. Preference for a particular style of learning was also identified by Kolb (1976) who thought an individual would exhibit a preference for one of the following four phases of what he described as a learning cycle – *activists* preferring 'here and now' activities, *reflectors* preferring assimilation and reflection on information, *theorists* liking to explore in depth and fit things into a theoretical framework and *pragmatists* preferring to see a recognizable benefit or practical value in what they are learning.

Interviews that Saljo (1979) conducted with students showed that they viewed learning under several broad headings:

- as an increase in knowledge
- as memorizing
- as acquiring facts or procedures to be used
- as making sense
- as understanding reality.

It is only the two latter points that indicate move beyond acquisition of facts to an impression of transformation or change of behaviour, an attempt to see the

world differently. Researchers have considered various taxonomies in order to consider what capabilities a university student should be able to exhibit, but in relation to the list above it is perhaps Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) focussing on the cognitive domain and development of intellectual abilities and skills which are pertinent here. The ability to evaluate, synthesise, analyse, and apply and manipulate knowledge, is words and phrases that regularly appear as part of the learning outcomes in our postgraduate modules. However, I am not sure that learning based upon any one of these abilities has feedback appropriate to that particular ability, and is provided in an appropriate format.

Marton (1988) has emphasised context and content and considers any one task will elicit a different reaction in terms of the learning approach a student might adopt. This, he argues, points to a *variability* in learning approach: important in that it focuses attention away from the viewpoint that as individuals we are consistent and stable, and cannot be expected to take the same approach time after time. Perkins et al (1993); Carr & Claxton (2002); Entwistle (1991) all discuss this concept as student dispositions in the classroom and believe these may be considered as habits of the mind inferring a tendency to respond to circumstances in particular ways. Learning disposition is well described by Carr & Claxton (2002 p10) as 'an inclination towards learning, i.e. being 'ready and willing' as a volitional activity', and Sadler (2002 p46) expands this viewpoint saying it is erroneous 'to speak of a learning disposition as if it were an enduring characteristic of a learner, in practice dispositions are highly, and probably

inevitably, situational'. In practice, in dealing with a group of students it would be impossible to take account of each individual learning disposition. Struyven et al (2005) in their literature review on student perceptions of assessment exemplify how progression affects each student: 'former experiences, the context and the assessment mode, make the student's approach to learning a very individual approach that changes constantly' (p336). Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) argued this constant change could be linked to learning careers and considered that exposure to a variety of assessment regimes as defined by schools and external exam regulations contributed to students developing individual 'assessment careers' (p478).

Personally I believe that our tendency to form habits means our students are most likely to have an inbuilt approach to learning situations by the time that they enroll on postgraduate courses, based upon their previous educational experiences: this, coupled with their orientation to learning, probably means they perceive and approach the requirements of the curriculum differently from their peers and their lecturers. This could be described as an amalgam of attitudes, dispositions and decision-making as they progress through formal programmes. There is evidence to suggest that young people develop learning careers through complex interactions between personal dispositions and learning strategies with particular contexts, structural and institutional conditions and peer norms, teaching and learning activities' (Ecclestone & Pryor 2003 p 473). These writers suggest the term can be applied 'to the fragmented and uncertain experiences of

many adults' and the roots of the term derive from sociology and the Chicago school where 'career' was used as a metaphor for looking at the self over time and was moderated by institutional structures that also changed over time. There seems some relationship here with Lave & Wenger (1991) who surmised 'activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning' (p50). These writings are moving towards the need for a broader approach to pedagogic issues, and the diagram below shows the inter-relationship of various aspects of the learning cycle.

DIAGRAM REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



Figure 3 Student Learning in Context Ramsden (1992 P 43)

It follows that to deliver a course with a systematic lecture/seminar approach and repetitive styles of assessment is likely to be unsatisfactory for a proportion of students whose learning disposition does not respond well to that method of delivery. Repetitive methods of teaching and presentation styles may advantage some students but provide an unequal learning and assessment environment for the class as a whole. Such an approach implies all students learn in the same way and approach their learning in a consistent and stable way. Differing learning dispositions and learning careers would seem to suggest the opposite. Stobart (2005) sums this up by saying 'fair assessment cannot be considered in isolation from both the curriculum and the educational opportunities of the students' (p275). Nesbit and Burton (2006) found perceptions of unfairness in terms of 'negative justice perceptions are important because of their capacity to reduce motivation and produce negative behaviours' (p664).

The implication of these statements is far-reaching because to effect change addressing these points implies the need for redesign of modules and adoption of a variety of approaches to course delivery. This is an issue in my own business school where the confines of the timetable and teaching spaces place limits on teaching delivery methods and where the majority of assessment tasks have similar requirements, for example presentation as a report. However, each assignment must address different set of learning outcomes. Variety of approach in curriculum delivery would seem a necessity to ensure inclusiveness, and provide a varied learning environment taking individual learning

dispositions and learning careers into account, yet the requirement to demonstrate a range of teaching and assessment methods seems to have declined in importance with increasingly simplified validation procedures. However, is too much variety confusing to students? It is contrary to Gibbs & Simpson's (2004) views that too much variety in terms of assessment is detrimental to the student.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON GOOD FEEDBACK

Intervention studies, and research with specific groups of students, detailed earlier in this chapter, have looked at how students react to feedback on assessment. They provide signals on student views which give a conflicting picture of what is effective, as well as indicating the difference perceptions of effectiveness between students and tutors that leads Carless (2006) to suggest 'these differing viewpoints are presented as barriers that distort the potential for learning' (p220). There is also ample confirmation that some feedback has negative effects rather than the positive ones intended. Certainly these studies challenge the idea that providing feedback in itself should be sufficient to lead to improvement in students' work: an idea that can perhaps become ingrained in organizational culture (Crisp 2007). It also becomes clear that there is no 'ideal' because each student will interpret their learning environment in their own way: however, it should alert tutors to the need for a flexible approach in what they do. An example of this is given by Skyrme (2007) in her investigation of international student experiences. One student with better oral than written

skills when uncertain about what to do approached his lecturers for advice but 'the brief encounters available to him for verbal enquiries provided no obvious explanation for the ineffectiveness of his previously successful learning practices, and no counter to unhelpful advice' (p357). What he needed at this point was a conversation on what was expected of him: he had effectively 'lost the right to speak' (Bourdieu 1977, p648).

Another issue that these studies raise is whether tutors and students have different concepts on the role that feedback plays in learning. Several studies indicate feedback is considered in a positive light if it is constructive (Crisp 2007: SENLEF 2006) but when it is vague and unfocussed it can have limited impact (Brockbank & McGill 1998). It is not sufficient for the feedback to be positive it also needs to be task oriented: (Hattie 1999) 'the more the feedback is directed at the task demands and not the person then the more powerful the feedback' (p11). Kluger and DeNisi (1996) had earlier found feedback effectiveness was increasingly valuable in a hierarchy of meta-tasks which included self-related issues, task motivation, and task learning. They discuss the results of much research on the positive and negative affects of feedback and indicate that even satisfactory feedback may be viewed negatively in some cases. They also found negative feedback may be accepted in some cultures, and in extreme examples be more acceptable than if it is positive. Importantly it is difficult to predict how feedback will be received, or the coping mechanism that any one individual will adopt: reject the messages, decide to lower the standard, or ideally enhance

effort. Shute (2007) suggested that whether feedback motivated, and whether it was received as positive depended to a great extent on what task was set, and the learning point that each student had reached.

Acceptance of the positive or negative comments is one thing, but is the feedback actually understood: can students make sense of what is being said (Higgins et al 2001; Orsmond et al 2005; Chanock 2000) and is it meaningful? Comments such as 'essay is not sufficiently analytical' may mean nothing, quality and style of writing are important (Duncan 2007). If they do receive the messages are they then prepared to become actively engaged with what is being said (Orsmond et al 2005). This is important as there is very limited support amongst writers (Crisp 2007) for the view that students make changes after receiving feedback that are in line with the intent of that feedback: perhaps this is more an indicator of misunderstanding the meaning of the feedback itself, or indeed lack of clarity on the part of the marker (Skyrme 2007). The lack of understanding could be that tutors and students have a mismatch of ideas as to the goals of the task itself (Hounsell 1985; Norton 1990). There is some evidence that students do not appreciate feedback can help improve work for later assignments (Duncan 2007; Carless 2006).

Some of the views of students (Pitts 2005 ; SENLEF 2006) are that they would prefer more verbal, face-to-face feedback, as 'what students really seek is a dialogue with tutors about their work rather than written feedback' (Orsmond et

al 2005, p370). The SENLEF project, whilst seeking to explore student views on feedback was run in an old University with very different assessment regulations than those at Westminster, and where it was usual for students to hand-in drafts of assignments, prior to final submission.

Additionally students would like more equality in the type of written comments received across various modules, and these comments also need to be readable. They also prefer to see comments through their work rather than just on a front sheet: 'I prefer tutor comments in the margins. They are more helpful than general comments at the end as they are specific, indicating where corrections need to be made' (Orsmond et al 2005 p376), and again, 'terms like 'check spellings; and more depth' are unhelpful'. (p377)

The study of how biology students make use of formative feedback is worth mentioning in greater detail (Orsmond et al 2005) as the students are studying in what appears to be similar situations to those at Westminster. In semi-structured interviews with sixteen students Orsmond et al ascertained that they were using feedback specifically 'to enhance motivation, enhance learning, encourage reflection and clarify their progress' (p373): additionally in a general way to enrich their learning environment and 'engage in mechanistic enquiries into their study' (p370). Comments in relation to motivation included 'feedback should criticize, but the tutor must say how well you've done and indicate possible improvements; only by doing this can feedback help learning' (p374),

and 'feedback enables you to develop and become more confident. You are motivated to approach lecturers to talk to them about your work', (p374). However, 'if formative feedback is given, but then the summative mark is still poor you doubt the value of the formative feedback', (p374) and; 'feedback is not in itself detrimental, but it can be upsetting', (p374). In relation to enhancement of learning, 'feedback has improved my learning and grades. It has helped me to learn differently', and 'feedback changes your direction of learning, no feedback no change', (p375). Enhancing reflection is indicated by comments such as 'feedback points out omissions and mistakes and clarifies why a lower mark was awarded', (p376) and interestingly worries over final degree classifications rather than modular progress with comments such as 'I'm worried about my degree classification and how they are calculated. I need guidance on this', (p376).

Summary

In this part of the chapter I have tried to extract the main features necessary to provide good feedback, and the methods that appear to be the best at doing this. I have also indicated some of the ways in which students do use feedback and the negative aspects they found unhelpful. The following Figure incorporates the main findings and the factors that influence them.

DIAGRAM REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Figure 4 Factors affecting Feedback success

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING

The International Student

My study is focussed on full-time postgraduate students in a business school. Because enrolment data shows the majority of the students on these degrees have come from overseas to study, it is appropriate to include some discussion of issues which have been shown to be of concern to these students. From the lecturers perspective the problem of teaching students from diverse backgrounds will produce similar difficulties to those linked with widening participation into higher education: but perhaps an appropriate way to describe the problem is 'different worlds in the same classroom' (Perry, 1970, p45). Once enrolled, it appears that overseas students are usually expected 'to follow the same curriculum as all other students and are required to earn the same results as other students', (Jochems et al 1996, p25) and this had a deleterious effect on the overseas students. In their study with students at a Dutch university Jochems et al found that overseas students needed more time to pass exams and 'their study behaviour was significantly different from the Dutch students': they were also 'more likely to postpone examinations and to follow a different order from the recommended one' (p43). At Westminster all students follow exactly the same course in the same way, whether home or overseas and although it is outside the scope of this study there is some evidence that overseas students take longer to graduate and the weaker students take longest of all.

It may not be of direct importance to international students but there is some evidence that universities themselves have not developed an institutional approach to internationalisation, and what effectively happens is a piecemeal approach at a local level to dealing with courses that welcome overseas students: 'the increased recruitment of international students has contributed to the rapid diversification of student demographics, while simultaneously challenging teaching and learning practices' (Asmar 2005, p291). Yet she considers that 'to focus solely on the learning experience of international students (as Australian research has tended to do) risks overlooking the needs of local students from diverse backgrounds, as well as bypassing the benefits and complexities of both groups sharing educational experiences' (p292). Indeed Volet & Ang (1998) found 'there is hardly any mention in the literature of the significance of local students' attitudes and behaviours on inter-cultural contact', (p8), and suggested 'tertiary institutions have a social responsibility to design learning environments which foster students' developments on intercultural adaptability (p21). According to Bamford (2008) overseas students studying in the UK wanted lecturers to incorporate knowledge of their own cultures into classroom discussions which they believed would benefit all students. Initiatives of this kind do need to be wider than course or even School level since what is needed is a cultural shift across institutions which will be reflected through validation and teaching and learning policies, perhaps as Bartell (2003) suggests a programme for planned institutional adaptation is a necessary pre-requisite.

One issue that arises is that of stereotyping students from particular cultural backgrounds. Baumgart & Halse (1999) researched the views of lecturers teaching postgraduate international students and found that there were stereotyped views of Western learners as independent and Asian learners as being more docile and compliant and preferring rote learning. However, there was little to support that view when they reviewed undergraduate examination papers in Japan, Thailand and Australia: their paper raises the issue of assumptions and expectations that in reality have little or no validity.

There is also the tendency to think of 'international students' in a class as a homogeneous group rather than individuals, (Li & Kaye 1998, Ninnes, Aitchison & Kalos, 1999, Burns 1991), although there may be major differences between students from different nations, for example the Asian countries on the Pacific rim and between students from different ethnicities within nations. Also, according to Asmar (2005) some academics, 'still tend to assume local (or domestic) students are a relatively monocultural, monolingual group, having little in common with international students' (p292). Li & Kaye (1998) consequently found it was difficult to obtain information about the needs of different student groups: unsurprisingly their own findings indicated real differences between students from Western Europe and those from Asia.

What is commented upon in a number of papers are views on students from particular backgrounds, one being Chinese-heritage culture students: they are

frequently considered to be rote learners but there is often a misunderstanding that rote learning is surface learning. Ninnes, Aitchison & Kalos (1999) argue 'that learners from countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and China are not passive with a focus on rote learning, but are active, struggling to attain deep understanding of course content' (p325), and they use this strategy 'as a way of internalizing or ensuring accurate recall of well-understood material' (p325). These views are reiterated in work by amongst other writers (Marton, et al 1993, Tang 1993, Chalmers & Volet 1997).

Some writers have looked at what causes concern for students' studying overseas. Li & Kaye (1998) showed the main factors influencing all overseas students' perceptions could be divided into the following 4 categories:

- 'students' academic progress;
- teaching and tutoring;
- student services and student support systems; and
- students' English language proficiencies' (p42).

The comparative data they produced for postgraduate students found accommodation and financial problems rated as areas of highest concern, with mixing with UK students, academic progress, and English proficiency next in order (p47). Bartram (2008) suggests needs of overseas students can be expressed under the headings of practical, emotional, cultural and integrational, and language, whilst Stiers (2002) classifies needs as accademic, social, intellectual and emotional, whereas Carroll (2002) prioritises writing, assessment and reading. Habu's (2000) research with Japanese students in the UK showed

students who felt they were different may feel their presence is merely tolerated, rather than positively valued for their scholarly contributions. A student quoted by UKCOSA (2004) said 'Tell us how to mix with UK people properly because in fact there's lots of barriers to get close to them. Sometimes UK students underestimate international students' capabilities, and it's hard to work in a group' (p67). The main conclusion of Turner's (2006) research with Chinese students studying in the UK was that their approaches to learning changed little 'owing to the culturally implicit nature of UK academic conventions and that they experienced high levels of emotional isolation and loneliness, which affected their academic confidence' (p27).

I am not aware of work in my own business school that investigates the principal needs and concerns of students studying with us.

Cultural factors relating to student backgrounds

Culture is a factor to consider in relation to student learning and many of the points raised above relate in some way to cultural backgrounds. Ramsden (1995), along with Hattie & Timperley (2007), and Shute (2007), contends the way a student approaches the learning situation is to some extent dependent upon previous educational experience. This viewpoint can be expanded by considering the wider impact of what Gummerson (1991) named pre-understanding – that is previous knowledge of a field [in this case the student view of education] that is brought to a new situation, and in this he includes not only knowledge but attitudes and commitment. This fits well with, and indeed overlaps, the writing on 'learning careers' discussed earlier in this chapter.

Gummerson develops his argument through a focus on paradigms, and in particular the socio-cultural paradigm of Kuhn (1970) representing the value judgments, norms, standards, frames of reference, perspectives, ideologies, myths, theories and so on that influence thinking and behaviour in a specific society. This paradigm is what is generally regarded as culture. There are a number of recurring themes in the literature that discuss culture in relation to cross-national projects (Adler 1983; Schein 1985; Hofstede 1993; Tromenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997) which is in effect what our Masters courses have become. Culture is seen as the repertoire of ways in which a society learns to respond to situations over time, and learned responses become embedded and influence the collective world-view of the members of that culture. In courses that are cross-national students may not share the concepts, models, ideas and theories of either the lecturer or the institution for both cultural and linguistic reasons, and indeed lecturers may not share the concepts of the host institution if they themselves are from a different culture, as is increasingly the case in WBS. An example of this comes from Cadman (2000) who found postgraduate course co-ordinators believed they had 'a lack of appreciation of the cultural and learning difficulties faced' by international students, and where the writer considered 'many of these scholars may bring distinctive learning traditions and find our academic contexts quite different from their previous experiences in terms of expectations and academic requirements' (p476). These views were emphasized by student responses when they said 'in my culture to criticize is not encouraged' (p480); or, from a different student 'my own culture does not

encourage me enough to express critical thoughts' (p480); and a third student 'to criticize and to judge the articles or literature are something new for me, because [in my home country] our study approaches were more passive, we became receivers of knowledge and we rarely argued about our subjects' (p480). These were all views of international postgraduate students enrolled at an Australian University.

Hofstede (1993) considered national cultures differ primarily in the fundamental, invisible values held by a majority of their members and acquired in early childhood, a type of collective programming that distinguished one group of people from another. He believed it was 'not directly accessible to observation but inferable from verbal statements and other behaviours and useful in predicting still other observable and measurable verbal and nonverbal behaviour'. If this is true then a whole tranche of attitudes and behaviours will go to make up the general feelings that any one student – whether home or overseas - brings to their personal learning situation on a course.

It begins to appear the lecturers' role in developing a programme of study and providing feedback, then fair assessment that is accessible equally to all members of the class, becomes inherently difficult and is exacerbated in a multicultural learning environment, in which many students 'do not share the academic, cultural or language background of the students for whom that system was broadly designed' (Skyrme 2007, p357).

A frequent complaint I have heard voiced in relation to overseas students is that some will rarely if ever participate in classroom discussion and appear to be passive learners. This does not take account of the cultural norms many students bring to the classroom nor their concerns about their own use of language. According to Chalmers & Volet (1997) many Asian students 'are not willing to draw attention to themselves by asking what they perceive to be an unnecessary question' (p91) and because of concerns over language they take time to adjust to 'style of speech used in academic and social settings' (p91). Mullins et al (1995) reported that south-East Asian students found lecturers spoke too quickly and used local examples and expressions that they did not understand, despite their written and spoken English being of a good standard. Miscommunication in the classroom can also result in some students appearing to be passive. Question and answer situations may indicate some students refuse to respond, although this may be due to a cultural norm making them reluctant to display knowledge to the whole class (Johnson 1997), and she suggests that it can be difficult to get opinions from those who are used to a rote learning environment. Some students may find it strange for a lecturer to invite conjecture from members of the class when they believe the lecturer to be the expert. Clearly classroom norms from the international student perspective can be very varied.

Language Issues

Overseas students are very likely to be studying at Westminster other than in their first language. This may equally be true for some home students, although they will presumably have had greater exposure to English. Lisle (1985) suggests language is not simply a medium for conveying concepts, models and so on, but is a part of the conceptual system that reflects institutions, thought processes, values and ideology. 'Feedback is generally delivered in academic discourse which students may not have full access to' (Carless 2006, p221). This implies the approach to a topic and interpretation of it will differ based on the language of expression. Sapir-Whorfian hypothesizes (Whorf 1956) that structure in one's native language can determine how one interprets and responds to reality.

The literature puts forward the view that translation should strive for equivalence (Brislin 1976) which can best be tested through back translation. However, where students have studied English as a second language it is usually from the context of the social language of English rather than one directed at a teaching and learning context (Gee 2004). One student in Cadman's (2000) study of international postgraduate students' experiences stated 'I feel somewhat as though I have to change the way I think and act when I am using this language' (p476). Considering the wide mix of native languages, both amongst students and lecturing staff the whole issue of equivalence and of certain understanding becomes extremely complex. In WBS the percentage of full-time staff with

English as their second language is approximately 33%. Problems with lecturers' spoken language are cited in the research with Robertson et al (2000) finding that lecturers do not speak clearly, and speak too fast were two of the most commonly defined problems for overseas students. Highest on the list was 'lack of confidence in verbal skill' for these students (p93), which made them reluctant to participate in class discussion. Language as an issue is not limited to overseas students: Bamford (2008) reports one UK student in a focus group commenting 'there are some people who come from different backgrounds – I don't know enough about how people are taught in China but we have different levels of English and different backgrounds – some people just receive and not give' (p2).

A number of writers (Ridley 2004; Lillis 2001; Kutz 2004; Skyrme 2007) indicate the need for students to have conversations with teaching staff to ensure they have understood what they are required to do: but these conversations need to be at a pertinent time, ensuring they fall within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), to be most effective. This needs to be in relation to taught material, to any reading which may be expected, and also in the understanding and interpretation of feedback.

It becomes apparent that any meaning lecturers are putting on both verbal and written feedback may be interpreted with quite a different meaning across a group of different nationalities and first languages. Crisp (2007) found 'students frequently do not understand comments that markers take to be self-evident'

(p574). Transparency over what lecturing staff are trying to impart does in my view become doubtful, and considering this against personal teaching experience over a number of years, primarily in the UK but also in eastern Europe indicates to me that I have not provided clarity simply by paying insufficient attention to the fact that students speak English as a second language. Where both students and tutors are working in their own second language there is likely to be added obfuscation: Ogier (2005), in a survey of ESL students at university, found that they 'rated ESL lecturers on average 0.4 points lower on a 5 point scale than student ratings of native English speaking lecturers' (p477) and these findings were in line with those of Finegan and Siegfried (2000) and Watts and Lynch(1989), who observed that students learned significantly less where they had an ESL lecturer. This may be an important factor in my own study with the high level of ESL lecturers, and it may have been a mistaken policy to recruit a range of ethnicities onto the staff to more closely reflect the student body.

These points lead to a further linguistic issue, that of the formal educational and bureaucratic language of academic and course regulations. Even to an English person they are often inaccessible and need to be read several times for confirmation of meaning; read as a second language the exact meaning is likely to be more problematic and may lead to the student feeling excluded from the processes of the institution where they are studying. The Carless (2007) study with Chinese students discussed earlier reflects these feelings.

Organisational, Institutional and Political issues

The management and organization of the academic year is an area which some writers emphasize the need to consider in the framework of the learning cycle. There are suggestions that there are side effects of institutional regimes, and Yorke (1998) concluded that there is a tendency for 'new universities' to construct 'strong managerial linkages 'down' from the senior management team' (p101). This has a tendency to reduce autonomy for the lecturer, and the knock-on effect is likely to be in possibilities for scope and organization in classroom learning. The restrictions of the academic calendar at Westminster appear especially harsh, and have had considerable knock-on effects on the possible timings of assessment, and added to the pressures on students, as indicated in Chapter Two.

Equally, the context of learning affects students, and there is increasing interest in research investigating the contextual framework within which students study (Young 1993; Sabatine 1998) where both writers link the political context with the economic and social contexts of the student learning environment. Cadman (2000) in her study of the experiences of international postgraduate students considers 'the educational and ethical issues of internationalizing postgraduate education are rarely considered, even in policy making' (p476). This view is reinforced by Bartell (2003) who suggests that there needs to be an organizational approach of planned change in the curriculum to integrate an international perspective where universities decide to adopt a strategy of

recruiting international students, rather than the more normal approach of piecemeal provision of activities and support geared to these students and therefore continuing their separation from home students. Whilst I believe Westminster does have a range of provision in place at University level there has not been an organizational approach to the concept of internationalization.

Course delivery itself can be affected by the level of operation, Mutch (2003) states 'the shift towards modules has meant a fragmentation in academic thinking and organization' (p171), and courses 'can lack meaningful continuity' according to Duncan (2007 p 276). This has resulted to some measure in courses becoming disjointed, and can result in difficulties related to provision of feedback where in fully modular systems a student may not receive any feedback until the module is completed Lea & Street (2000). Additionally, (Higgins et al 2001) 'if competing discourses are associated with different disciplines and tutors, students face increasing problems as they move between these disciplines (especially in the light of modularization)', (p273) argue.

Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet (2007) investigated programme assessment environments on student learning, and that even though student learning responses varied between courses at any one institution, 'the institution contributed more to variance in student response than did the course, suggesting that there are global features of assessment environments, probably resulting from institutional cultures embodied in the operation of course approval

mechanisms and institutional quality assurance norms or regulations' (p6). They found 'the modern assessment environment in a teaching-oriented institution was found to be associated with less positive learning responses' (p26) with 'low levels of formative-only assessment and oral feedback, with clear specification of goals and standards and aligned curricula' (p26). Very much a description of practice at Westminster.

Conclusions

This chapter has aimed to provide an understanding of the essentials of the feedback process and its place within the learning cycle, plus those features that are thought to provide quality feedback and affect its likely reception by students. It has discussed problems that international students encounter when studying in western higher education, alongside cultural and language issues which seem especially pertinent to the postgraduate student background at my institution. Finally it has shown that organizational constraints on academic calendars imposed by the institution can influence the efficacy of feedback.

What I have mostly found in the literature is a single level approach to investigating feedback; that is one aspect of feedback, usually related to written comments on assessment. I had hoped to find a more multi-dimensional approach: that is taking a wider view of the scope of feedback, which is what I believe there needs to be. However, as a background in some of the literature, more especially in the most recent papers, there is mention of the perceived

influences of social, cultural and linguistic issues. This leads me to judge that looking at what constitutes a narrow definition of feedback constitutes only a small part of what needs to be considered when teaching multicultural groups on modular schemes in a modern university.

Whilst students are of necessity taught in group situations, a wider understanding of the factors which may influence individual learning in those groups would provide tutors with a valuable insight into improving that learning environment. Each educational institution has its own culture and the way in which it operates and communicates with students through academic and administrative staff is unique, as is the particular diversity of any student body. Similarly each student has developed through their own culture and first language individual social constructions of reality, thus within any one group there will be a range of both learning careers and learning dispositions. The challenge for the teacher is to find a means by which the majority of students can benefit from the way in which any course is delivered and therefore benefit from the range of feedback available to them, if that is what they choose to do. The success of the learning and feedback cycle cannot be generalised but needs to be contextualized against a set of generalised guidelines. I think that for anyone trying to explore whether there is any truth that 'students do not take advantage of feedback available to them' it is important to try and ascertain what students understand by feedback, as well as the impact that institutional and sociocultural factors may have on delivery of the curriculum.

A broader approach to considering feedback should make it possible to evaluate whether aspects outside the immediate teaching and learning situation impinge on student feedback experiences. Intervention studies give credence to the idea of looking at feedback at a local level. Moreover discussion of some of the research into student opinions has shown that providing feedback is not as straightforward as it might at first appear. Indeed the variables presented by a group of students in a multicultural learning environment make adequate feedback provision for all appear daunting. It seems appropriate, therefore, to use a case study approach to try and reach some conclusions on the learning environment and use of feedback within the Westminster Business School.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodology that I have utilized and the rationale supporting the approach I have taken to my research question. It incorporates what I consider to be the germane ethical issues and possible concerns of personal bias; it provides detail of any assumptions made, and provides a breakdown of the students who took part in the research.

A Case Study in an Institutional Setting

The way that I have chosen to conduct this research is by taking a case study approach to the problem that I posed in the previous chapter: that is to investigate what influences the student experience and understanding of feedback. My case study is essentially one in which I have, according to Stake(1995), an intrinsic interest, where I am looking at a particular case in a specific context – postgraduate students within the Westminster Business School – and trying to gain insight into experiences of feedback through investigating that particular learning environment. Taking an individual case allows for a more in-depth look at the circumstances which are specifically grounded in this discrete, and unique, organizational environment, and enables concentration on the viewpoints and values of the people being studied, that is the emic issues of the case. Additionally, a case study generally has precise boundaries; in this case student views within a business school where there are tight timescale boundaries related to the academic year.

A number of writers have expressed the view, with which I agree, that case study is not necessarily a methodology in its own right but rather a 'strategy' (Yin 1989 p1), a 'model' (Silverman, 2000 p77) or a 'main method' (Gillham, 2000 p13) which can be used according to Robson (1997) 'for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context' (p 146). Within the model there is the opportunity to use a number of data collection methods, selecting the ones most appropriate to the particular question being researched. There are various ways of categorizing case studies, but I consider that this is both an instrumental case study (Stake, 1998 p88) since it illustrates the issues raised by the research question and an exploratory one, in that it is, as Robson (1997) says 'trying to get some feeling as to what is going on in a novel situation' (p149) around the feedback aspect of the student learning cycle in a particular institutional setting.

Ontological assumptions at the beginning of the research

When I was planning this piece of research I clearly brought a set of ontological assumptions to its design. From my personal experience, I believed that there were unexplored issues in relation to feedback, not least in the use of the term itself, and that at a personal level I had a rather 'top down' approach to its use. If I provided feedback, that was sufficient, it was up to the students to make use of it! In the years I have been teaching primarily postgraduate students this view had gradually eroded. Expanding feedback, through provision of greater

detail on what was expected in coursework, generally failed to see an improvement in the quality of work submitted, and feedback on that work seldom seemed to lead to an improvement the next time around, even in quite mechanistic aspects of subsequent work such as proofreading and checking on referencing methods: nor indeed did approaches to exam questions indicate that feedback had been taken on board. Discussion with colleagues revealed similar situations in other similar modules that these students were studying. Some of these views were evidenced in my IFS (page 59).

Given the increased emphasis I had been putting on coursework expectations and examination preparation I was, personally revising my viewpoint on what made feedback successful and I was becoming more aware of the need for feedback to be received and valued in order to be used. I was also questioning the way feedback was generally defined – as a direct response to performance or completed task. By the time I came to this study my ontological stance had moved towards one that supported the idea of the 'social reality' (Carspecken, 1995 p24), or social context of student learning being an important aspect of the learning cycle and feedback process. Thus the variables of human activity and performance, related human experience, and the factors which influence both human experience and performance, were of equal importance to any teaching that I was providing, and any feedback that the students were given.

From the university perspective more interest was being taken in feedback;; however, this was primarily that feedback from staff to students took place, and whether student opinion on staff feedback improved. Firstly, it concerned me that in order to meet University requirements we might be moving towards a 'tick the box' approach to its provision. Secondly, when I read leaflets distributed by our Educational Initiative Centre an extremely one-sided approach was taken, feedback was always related to assessment; an approach that was repeated at institutional level in teaching plans, and in QAA documents. [See Chapter Three]. Overall, I had become increasingly critical in my own mind of the assessment-based approach and quality issues related to feedback at an institutional level. The expected norm required by the institution generally meant that each student could expect one, sometimes two, feedback events from each module. College documentation did not encourage a student to look further than written comment on a piece of work.

Essentially feedback was 'given' to students about their assessment (Askew & Lodge 2000). Little attention was being applied to what I believed were important factors, the wider aspects relating to how it was understood and received by students, nor to the wider meaning of the word distinct from the assessment process. Seemingly only cursory attention was being given to helping students develop their learning skills. Therefore, what I have tried to do is what Leedy & Ormrod (2005) suggest that research is about: the collection,

analysis, and interpretation of information (data) in order to increase the understanding of the event or situation that is of interest, in this case feedback. I wanted to investigate the reality of feedback from the students' perspective, what exactly did they understand the term to mean, and what factors had an effect on that understanding. I realized my perceptions of the institutional view that the main issue was adequate provision, not necessarily quality provision, were subjective and from an ontological perspective I believed, because of my experience, that there were a number of variables that needed reflection when considering the issues that might affect any student's responses to feedback. This meant that my own perspective was not value-free, and that I must be aware of my bias both in the design of the proposed interviews and questionnaire, my interpretation of the data that I collected, and also my interpretation of the literature that I read. My obligation was to take as objective a stance as possible in the design, conduct and evaluation of the research and to keep an open mind.

Since no two people see the world in exactly similar ways the assumption must be that there was no absolutely true reality of the situation that I planned to investigate. My perception of the reality of the postgraduate experience in the Westminster Business School would be that it is a general phrase that has no underlying meaning, and which Burrell & Morgan (1979 p3) believed

demonstrated 'the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world'.

Ethical Issues in the Research

Whilst I had to be aware of any bias that I might have during the design and implementation of my proposed research I also needed to be aware of any ethical issues that there might be in relation to the proposed study. I had to ensure that I had the support of the Dean of School to undertake this study, which was obtained, and to assure academic staff involved with the postgraduate courses and modules, where appropriate, that the objective of the study was to ascertain how students experienced feedback, and how they generally understood the term, in order that our collective delivery to students might be improved and students helped to make better use of the feedback: it was also important that staff did not think that student views on individual lecturers' performance was being sought.

Equally it had to be clear to students that agreement to be interviewed was totally voluntary and that everything that they said would be non-attributable and in confidence. Since any outcomes in terms of changing practice could only be effected over time, students could be assured that the study would have no effect on delivery of their courses and modules in any way. Similar assertions could be made to students who completed the questionnaire; this did not ask for names but anyone who was willing to discuss the questionnaire further could

supply their email address if they wished. I was confident that nobody was going to be asked to take part without having full knowledge of the objectives of the study (Robson 1993) and the methods of data collection, as discussed.

At a personal level I needed to be sensitive to concerns that students might have over expressing their opinions before they had actually graduated. For this reason it was essential that students understood that they were not being asked to comment on the performance of their individual lecturers but on their own cycle of learning and feedback and their own experiences at Westminster. For students from other cultures this might be a particularly sensitive situation since they might hold differing views on the role of the lecturer and the power relationships that existed between student and lecturer. They might additionally be affected by the age and ethnicity of the interviewer and their perceptions of my identity. I also needed to be aware of similar concerns my own project students might have in being involved in the pilot when they had not yet submitted their final project for marking.

From an ethical perspective I did have some personal involvement in the research as I am a postgraduate module leader and I might well find that I had contributed to the teaching and assessment of someone who agreed to be interviewed. There could, therefore, be a conflict of values at a personal level: this did in fact turn out to be the case as two students whom I had taught did

volunteer to be interviewed, but this was after the module that I had taught had been completed and the results had been published.

Research Design

Qualitative research is according to Birn, Hague and Vangelder (1990) about explaining and understanding, and I was looking for a means of collecting data that would provide me with evidence that would lead me to an understanding of postgraduate students' experiences of feedback and give me sufficient data to attempt an explanation of their reactions and what was going on. What I wanted to do was, as Gilham (2000, p11) suggests, 'view the case from the inside out: to see it from the perspective of those involved', and, as he goes on to say, (Gilham p 11) study how 'thoughts and feelings are partly determined by their context'. Yin (1989 p70) advocates a multi-method approach to data collection as being the most appropriate for case studies, and both Gillham (2000 p13) and Creswell (1998 p61) support this view. Therefore, it was clear to me that I would need to collect evidence from a range of sources to help me understand how students reacted to feedback and to enable methodological triangulation of the data that I collected.

Given some of the difficulties of collecting data from students I considered that perhaps the most obvious ways would be the most successful, that I would ask for volunteers from the relevant student body to be interviewed, and use the results of those interviews as the basis for a survey to all students to verify my

interview findings. At the same time, I would review any pertinent University or School documents. This three-pronged approach allowed for triangulation of the findings after data collection.

The boundaries of the research were twofold: the students to be studied were all postgraduate students enrolled on courses within one School of the University, and all were in the final half of their courses. The timescale for the data collection was bounded by the then current structure of the academic year within the University and was limited to one Semester, January to March 2008.

By conducting interviews on an individual basis I felt that I was most likely to obtain personal, and individual views, even if there were some questions where any one student did not actually have a defined opinion. This did not in fact prove to be the case in any of the interviews. As the interviewer I was aware that one-to-one interviews had the advantage of my knowing that as Denscombe (2003) suggests 'opinions and views expressed throughout the interview stem from one source' (p 168) and should be easier to control.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Documentation

The documentation was primarily internal to the University and included University-wide documents as well as School based documents that were provided to all postgraduate students. The reason for consulting the

documentation was to ascertain whether there were useful guidelines to both staff and students relating to feedback as part of the learning cycle. The pertinent documentation that was consulted consisted of booklets and leaflets from

- Quality Assurance Agency
- Handbooks prepared by the University Educational Initiative Centre
- University Teaching and Learning Strategy documents
- Postgraduate course handbooks.

These documents provided a means of expanding the background to what were in effect 'working practices' at the University during the timescale of this study. The Quality Assurance Agency guidelines would be guidelines that the University consulted in devising their Teaching and Learning Strategy documents: the handbooks prepared by the Educational Initiative Centre provided lecturer support for writing and marking assessment, and the student handbooks, that are written to a standard format, give the student necessary information about University regulations and the conduct of assessment. In reviewing this documentation I looked for all mentions of 'feedback'.

Interviews

I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews, using some closed questions but more open ones asking students for their personal opinions and reactions, and allowing them to answer in their own words. In reality I think that the interviews tended, as Denscombe (2003, p167) suggests they do, to 'slide back and forth

along the scale' between structured and semi-structured. These interviews were essentially episodic in nature Gauer & Gaskell (2000, p43) as they were linked to a very specific set of circumstances – what students understood the scope of feedback to be, whether their experiences of feedback equated with the quality feedback the literature highlights, how they utilised it as part of their learning, and how they viewed their learning experiences at the University.

By conducting interviews on an individual basis I felt that I was most likely to obtain personal, and individual views, even if there were some questions where any one student did not actually have a defined opinion. This did not in fact prove to be the case in any of the interviews. As the interviewer I was aware that one-to-one interviews had the advantage of my knowing that as Denscombe (2003) suggests 'opinions and views expressed throughout the interview stem from one source' (p 168) and should be easier to control.

Use of semi-structured interviews with a similar starting point and described by Powney & Watts (1987) as a 'respondent interview' leads to more control for the interviewer, whereas a completely unstructured approach is harder to interpret and can leave the responder in control of the situation and the focus being lost. It is difficult to persuade students to be interviewed and time is important to them so that it is crucial that the interview stays focused and moves forward. By the second semester of their course all students should have had some

coursework returned with written feedback., therefore, I asked all interviewees to bring one piece of returned coursework with written feedback to the interview. This provided not only a means of assessing the accessibility, understanding and usefulness of the information for the student, but a way of putting students at their ease, since it was something already familiar to them, and hopefully would lead into immediate discussion.

I did consider arranging group interviews but decided that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages in this particular context. As many students did not have English as a first language I felt they might be less willing to put their views forward in a group situation, and aligned with that I felt that some members of the group might dominate the discussion. Most importantly this approach was unlikely to provide the personal opinions and experiences that I sought. Given the difficulties of getting volunteers to be interviewed I feel this was the right decision. Since I wanted individual experiences, a semi-structured interview approach seemed the most suitable. It enabled closed questions which were essentially fact-finding, and so left time for students to expand their answers to the open questions, for me to probe where necessary, and try to find out exactly what the interviewee believed. A structured interview would also have been too similar to the self-completion questionnaire that was used to validate the interview questions.

I planned to use a probabilistic sampling technique for these interviews, and I anticipated that as suggested by Bauer & Gaskell (2000) 'common themes begin to appear and progressively one feels increased confidence in the emerging understanding of the phenomenon being researched' (p43). Whilst I could not be exact about the number of interviews my plan was to interview around 20% of the relevant postgraduate population. This was likely to be approximately 25 students. Ideally the interview results would be stratified, certainly between those with English as their first or second language, and on age. However, since interviewees were volunteers, stratification beyond this was likely to be more difficult.

The interviews were originally piloted with my own postgraduate project students in the latter part of the 2006/07 academic year – four students, a mixture of full and part-time students and of those with English as a first or second language. As a result of this pilot the initial questions were considerably simplified to ensure that only one point was being addressed in each question and also that the questions were more focused. It was clear from the pilot that in some questions there was lack of clarity as to the point being raised.

It was extremely important for the interviewer not to need to lead the students towards giving an answer and it is for this reason also that the questions were shortened and simplified. However, during the interview process I found that

students would find they had a lot to say on something which would lead them to make a number of points out of context. I allowed this to happen as I wanted to capture as many of their thoughts on the topics as I could. This meant that on some occasions direct questions were omitted as students had already answered them under another topic. The primary aim of the interviews was to find out the views of each individual student and to look for common themes emerging from the responses. These themes, whether positive or negative, formed the basis for the subsequent questionnaire.

The semi-structured interviews were devised to be able to be completed in a 30-40 minute period. The final questions appear in Appendix B and were amended and/or changed following the pilot run: I have shown after each question the main focus of the questions which were taken from the key factors emerging from the literature review.

The interviews were recorded in MP3 format, which enabled each interview to be easily replayed. Because of the recording I held the interviews in my office where it was quiet enough for the responses to be clearly heard. At the beginning of the interviews I gave a brief explanation to each student as to the purpose of my research and got their agreement that I could record the interviews: explaining it was difficult to ask questions, listen to responses, and make detailed notes!

On completion of the interviews six were transcribed verbatim, and notes and quotations taken from the remainder. I also asked students to bring with them to the interviews a piece of marked assessed work, and I used this to begin the interviews. This was partly to help students vocalise their thoughts on the process of assessment and how they reacted to the feedback process generally. It was also to help them to settle into the interview situation, since the written feedback was something with which they were familiar, and were likely to have an opinion to voice. I numbered each student's set of responses and where I quote from a student or refer to their opinion in Chapter Five I have acknowledged this by citing that number after the quote.

Initially, I analysed the closed questions from the interviews such as age range, course on which the student was enrolled, gender, and made a table to record this data, set against the number assigned to each interview. In analyzing the content of the interviews I was looking for substantive comments. I used coloured markers to highlight positive and negative statements. I also marked statements that I felt added something to the findings but did not fit under the previous two headings. Initially I attempted to categorize these statements but eventually found I had too many categories that were not helpful to the overall analysis. I then decided to have one category of 'other comments' and underlined these in the transcripts and coded them across the transcripts

wherever I was able: so that I had comments that had been made in more than one interview and those that were of interest but only raised by one interviewee. After making a rough chart under four headings of positive and negative comments, interesting statements made by several people, and a final column of statements made by one person, I then listened to the recordings of the other interviewees. Each of these recordings was also assigned a number and I noted comments made under the same headings, in some cases using a tick to indicate agreement or repetition.

Questionnaires

As a result of the interviews a questionnaire was devised with the aim of validating the opinions expressed in these interviews amongst a wider student population, and were in line with the principal issues that emerged from the literature review.

There were questions relating to student background such as Age, Gender, first language of pre-Masters study, country of origin which mirrored the closed questions of the interviews. The majority of the questions required a Likert scale response. Finally there was an opportunity in two open-ended questions to add comments. The disadvantage of a questionnaire is the originator's inability to follow up on points of query or particular interest; and any data collected in open style questions is then open to the interpretation of the researcher, and there is a need to be careful in analyzing the survey results, because as Oakshott (2007,

p67) suggests 'the limited response range can give misleading results'.

However, there is generally considered to be less bias in surveys than in interviews, where (Gilham 2000) suggests different answers can be obtained by different interviewers to a question from the same respondent. The responses are more standardized since (Denscombe 2003, p159) 'all respondents are posed with exactly the same questions – with no scope for variation to slip in via face-to-face contact researcher'. The disadvantage is that, as happened in four cases, there is nothing that can be done about incomplete questionnaires, where a minority of questions is answered, and the questions themselves are generally limited in scope. However, in this situation it was a means of verifying data from the interviews where tight timescales and the issue of getting volunteers, meant that carrying out a great many more interviews was implausible.

I used Sphinx Plus software to design the questionnaire, and to record and analyse the responses. This software also provided an effective data analysis tool which helped with the analysis of the responses, and allowed me to search for any correlation that might exist. This questionnaire was again piloted with my own project students [different students from those used to pilot the interviews], and following amendment was distributed to students. Distribution was in two ways; firstly through hard copy being distributed to those students attending for revision sessions in core modules in May. Secondly, copies were also left in the

Postgraduate Tutorial Office, and students who went to the office were asked if they would complete a survey.

Triangulation

Multiple sources of data used as evidence helped aid the confirmation of any findings, and also allowed for a broader range of attitudinal and behavioral aspects of the data to be tackled (Yin 2003). The convergence of any of the resulting evidence from various sources makes any conclusions more likely to be reliable and convincing. In this research a scrutiny of pertinent documentation has provided an indication of the institutional viewpoint on the subject. The interviews have revealed students' understanding and opinions about feedback, and responses to the questionnaire have shown whether the main points of these opinions were shared by a greater percentage of the relevant student body.

Process

In order to obtain my volunteers I went into core [compulsory] module lectures by pre-arrangement with staff, during the first teaching week of Semester Two. I invited students who were then in their second semester of study to take part in interviews relating to their experiences of feedback in their first semester. With those willing to take part I arranged convenient meeting times via email, and asked them to bring a piece of marked, assessed work with them to the interview. Initially I had nineteen students willing to volunteer and who made appointments, but it was disappointing to find that five of these students did not

keep the agreed appointments, nor did they respond to re-arrangement of these timeslots. I was fortunate that the results of the interviews that I did conduct provided primarily similar responses to the questions posed so that I felt that I had obtained a consistent core of opinion on which to draw some conclusions and on which to base my questionnaire. My questions aimed to establish student reactions to feedback, factors that might affect its usefulness, and their perceptions of its scope. I was also looking for evidence that their reactions might be affected by some of the major influencing factors brought out in the literature review, such as language and culture. My principle reason for not attempting to arrange additional interviews was essentially one of timing: by the time I had completed the schedule, students were working on their Semester 2 coursework so I knew that it would be difficult to get additional volunteers to commit at this time.

The disadvantage of my approach to finding volunteers to be interviewed was that I could not ensure that these students provided a true cross-section of full-time students, even though a number of core modules are taught on several courses. Additionally, asking for volunteers does not ensure that there is a cross-section in terms of ethnicity, age, or in this case those with English as a first or second language. I might also have chosen to approach all the relevant student course representatives; however, this in itself would also have produced a biased group in that these students again would have not represented a true

cross-section of the student population. The semi-structured interviews were devised to be able to be completed in a 30-40 minute period.

Revision sessions were held during the first week of the summer term and I asked tutors holding these sessions if they would be willing to circulate and collect the questionnaires for me or allow me to do so. However, these revision sessions were only provided where students sat an examination, rather than complete end of module coursework, so I knew that all students would not have had the opportunity to fill one in. Therefore, I also left questionnaires in the postgraduate support office and some were completed by students when they went there for help or information. Overall, I obtained 70 responses to the questionnaire, although five of these were incomplete and not included in the data entry. The response rate was approximately 26 per cent of the total number of students who were still engaged in study in April 2008.

STUDENT BACKGROUND

The gender balance was as follows:

Interviews

Female	5
Male	9

Completed Questionnaires

Female	36
Male	29

Age Range

Questionnaire			
20-24 yrs	25-29 yrs	30-35 yrs	36+
35	25	3	2
Interviews			
6 [2m, 4f]	1 [f]	7 [m]	

Interestingly it is males in the older age range who volunteered to be interviewed, possibly they had more formed opinions than those in the younger ranges, or they were more involved in their study and had a greater interest in discussing their views, or more confident in expressing their views in English; however, it may have skewed the findings slightly overall, although the evidence when combined with the survey responses does not suggest this.

Multicultural Background of the Students

Interviewees

Studied Overseas	In English	Studied in UK
10	6 of the 10	4

Questionnaire n=65

Countries Cited	First Degrees Overseas	First Degree in English	First Degree not in English	First Degree partly in English	First Degrees in UK
41	35	35	22	8	9

These figures show clearly the diversity of the students and the variety of studying experience they had prior to enrolling at Westminster, and indicate that they may be working in groups where there is no dominant culture and where there may be a minority of students from the UK despite the fact that this is the host country.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to set the background for the research design and conduct and the reasons behind this. It has addressed issues relating to the relative success of these methods and adjustments that have needed to be made

in order to collect the data for interpretation and analysis. The findings of the data collection are discussed in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the primary and secondary research I used to investigate my research question 'Factors that Influence the Student Understanding and Experience of Feedback'. My aim was to try to find out whether a staff viewpoint that 'students do not take advantage of the feedback available to them during module delivery', was valid, or whether there were reasons why it appeared to be so.

The themes that emerged from the literature review essentially came under the following areas:

- 1 That quality feedback exhibits both positive and negative attributes;
- 2 That feedback is desirable, but needs to be understood and provide information on how to close the gap between current and required standards;
- 3 That ideally, through feedback, students will move to become self-regulated learners;
- 4 That understanding of feedback may be affected by language, culture, and social context;
- 5 That institutional regulations can have an important defining influence in determining how the learning environment operates.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY DATA SOURCES

The primary method of data collection I used was semi-structured interviews with students who volunteered to be interviewed and were in their second semester of full-time study, and there was a follow-up survey to as many postgraduate students as possible who were in their second or third semester to

validate the information collected in the interviews. I have divided the interview into sections for discussion and, where appropriate, linked interview responses with the responses to the questionnaire.

The secondary sources of data that I studied covered information provided externally, at University and at School level.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Documentation

The documents that I reviewed were from the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], and those published by the University and at School level. The QAA include a section on feedback to students and in their current document widen the scope of feedback beyond assessment to include provision of feedback during learning so that students can progress in time to improve their final marks. There is the suggestion that different forms of feedback can be used and that they are encouraged to seek feedback from a range of sources as well as teachers, such as peers, practitioners, personal tutors. (QAA Code of Practice, 2006). They also encourage the use of feedback to aid the learning process as a whole. This is a change from their previous guidelines (2001) which only referred to feedback on assessment.

Within the University the current policy document for Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy and Strategy, covers the period 2006-2009. In terms of

course delivery there are two relevant general statements: that teaching and learning methods should (p2) 'meet the learning needs of a diverse range of students (including international students)', with the implication that international students do in fact comprise a fairly homogeneous group. More specifically feedback practices, which are included with only one mention under assessment, should provide (p4) 'constructive and timely feedback to students'. It is almost certain that this Policy document was produced before, or simultaneously with, the new QAA Code of Practice, and apparently its definition of feedback has not been widened, and there was no update on this document as a result of the QAA publication.

The Education Initiative Centre [EIC] (2005) booklet 'Learning from Feedback', provides guidelines for the teaching staff based on the Teaching and Learning Strategy document. It takes a fairly theoretical approach to feedback from a system's perspective and its place in learning theory, but focuses primarily on feedback for assessment and only briefly mentions in the conclusion that (op cit p7) 'feedback is not a discrete activity but something that occurs all the time.' Neither this or the previous publication has assimilated the modular scheme into its thinking: references are almost exclusively made to courses, and omit the very real issue of students being taught by staff from several disciplines and possibly not appreciating the 'feedforward effect' that feedback can have when each module is developed as discrete.

At the time of writing the material disseminated by University and School documentation does not appear to be in line with the widening definition that the QAA have circulated. However, updated strategy and implementation documents will be due for the 2010 session.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Preamble to discussion of the Interviews and Questionnaire

Prior to discussing the responses to the interviews I should make clear that all the interviewees considered themselves good attendees, who were working hard and motivated to pass: in general they did not want to spend all their time studying to the exclusion of 'enjoying life as well' and keeping a balanced outlook.

Interviewees Perceptions about Assessment Feedback

I began the interviews by asking each student to discuss the piece of marked work that they had brought in: this was partly to help students settle into the interview but also estimate the quality aspects of written feedback. One student did not bring work and told me that all her first semester assignments had been completed in groups and she did not have copies of any of the feedback – so, disappointingly, halfway through her course she had not completed one piece of individual coursework (R 7), and found it surprising the course was organized in this way.

Written Comments

I asked each student to tell me what they understood by the written comments on their assignments, and whether they had found them helpful. Also whether any clarification from the tutor had been sought where something was not clear. Six students noted that they 'struggled with the [lecturers'] writing' (R 5), and 'some of the written comments are illegible' (R 3), in line with a common complaint that emerges in the literature. Most agreed it was helpful, one noting that 'it was useful particularly as the lecturer wrote about my style which I found really helpful. It was a useful first assignment because it was necessary to research so it made you do a lot of things you need to do – some coursework could have been quite narrow' (R 5). This same student went on to say that 'the feedback I wanted over everything else was am I writing academically, for the level, was the research correct'? Another, though pleased 'to find out I was on the right track', wondered if the feedback was more related to the topic itself, 'wondered if my problems were more related to structure, and feedback not really helpful on this; so not sure how to improve next time' (R 4). One student received typed comments on the work which obviously made it easy to read (R 8). A common comment as per this student was 'feedback useful' but was already doing other coursework and 'didn't find time to follow it up': and 'if I'd had it back earlier I could have applied it to the second paper of that module'

(R 6): so timeliness of feedback had been a factor here, and these students still showed uncertainty about what the feedback told them and if they were really working in the right way.

Set against these views were positive comments such as 'the feedback was useful because I used it in my next assignment' (R 10), and 'feedback gives a clearer understanding about the strengths and weaknesses of my learning' (R 11), and 'I was told where I went wrong and the reasons for that' (R 12).

Most interviewees believed they understood the feedback they received and found it useful and some re-read what had been said and reflected on how it might help with future work. However, there was one complaint about the language used in the feedback being too difficult. Others said it was not always helpful because 'I sometimes do not agree on what the feedback says about my assessment' (R 8) this student tended to provide negative views on feedback on a number of questions and was the exception. However, another student also said 'I don't always agree with the advice' (R 2) which was out of line with his positive views on feedback in general but he did not consider feedback was always clear (R 2). Student R10 felt that it was not always a motivator but believed 'constructive feedback is always beneficial'.

Whilst students liked to get feedback they all agreed that they looked at the mark first: just one student admitted to not reading the comments if she did not like the mark! (R 7) Most agreed the mark awarded had been roughly in the range expected. Unfortunately, one student felt that feedback was not 'always provided willingly, if at all, but it is important for both positive and negative parts of work'. Problems with poor writing did detract from their ability to use the comments but most did make use of them if they could, although they felt they were too brief. With this small sample of interviewees many of the common complaints about written feedback occurring in the literature were emphasized here: by and large students did not seek clarification of writing or comprehension.

One student (R 6) made an interesting observation about practical computing assignments: because she was new to this type of work she felt that not having performed well, and then not having the opportunity to resubmit – not in order to get a different mark – was detrimental to her because she would be planning to use this knowledge in a future job and needed to be confident that she could perform to a professional standard. I cannot say how prevalent this view might be since only three other students mentioned they had taken a practical module when I interviewed them, but building into the teaching programme the time for peer discussion or staff feedback prior to final submission is one of the ways in

which the literature discusses how learning transitions to new subjects, as well as new levels can be eased.

In relation to feedback on assignment work I asked all the students whether they received oral feedback from the lecturer, either immediately after the submission of their assignments, or when the work was returned, or both. One student said on one occasion a lecturer had discussed the coursework the first time she met the class after the submission date, otherwise the remainder had been told nothing until the work was returned. Surprisingly a third of the students said there was no general class feedback and they only received the written comments on their assignments. A repeated viewpoint was that 'two minutes with each student would be more useful' (R 8) reiterating the view of students in the SENLEF study discussed in Chapter Three. One suggestion was that written feedback, combined with overall feedback to the group, plus time with the lecturer to allow for some discussion of the written points raised, would be the ideal. This ideal is almost certainly impractical with large groups but would be possible in some seminar sessions or in option modules with smaller groups. It is a pity that there was not a habit for lecturers to give some immediate oral feedback whilst the work was fresh in the students' minds. It is disappointing that there was no general class feedback when the work was returned: as students learn in different ways those who find oral feedback helpful are losing out on what may be an important method of learning for them. Despite waiting

for the feedback all the students said they were interested in the comments, even if as mentioned above they could not make use of them immediately, and they typically found the comments motivational. None of the comments that I saw, nor that the interviewees talked about indicated that comments made alluded to self rather than the task, a positive aspect. Some of the poorer aspects of feedback such as lack of clarity and specificity, and timeliness were noted on occasion, although encouragingly students still felt they were motivated by the comments they received.

In the survey one group of questions was related to coursework assignments. It was clear – **Question 14, generally I have been clear on the goals of assignments that have been set** - that students overwhelmingly found their assignments to have clear goals when they first received them; although as indicated above interviewees were less sure about this when the work had been marked and returned. Again the majority found that the written comments they had on their marked work – **Question 15, I usually find the comments written on my assignments helpful** - were helpful, although a considerable 15.4 per cent did not agree with the statement: and that the comments themselves – **Question 16, I have found that the comments help me to understand the mark I have been given** – helped to clarify the mark awarded: 20 per cent did not think this was the case. Using the returns from the questionnaires this appears to be an area where students are mostly positive

about the assignments set and the feedback they receive, but there are a considerable number of students who do not find the comments helpful nor clarify the mark that has been given, and this may link to interview opinions where people thought they had understood the assignment until they got there work back.

	Q14	Q14 %	Q15	Q15 %	Q16	Q16 %
Non-Response	3	4.6	2	3.1	3	4.6
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0	1	1.5
Disagree	2	3.1	10	15.4	12	18.5
Agree	48	73.8	47	72.3	46	70.8
Strongly Agree	12	18.5	6	9.2	3	4.6

Table 1 Responses to Questions 14-16

What I discovered from this set of questions was that taken together the opinions of the interviewees and those completing the questionnaire do not indicate that there is a general level of written feedback that could be said to provide overall quality according to the standards indicated in the literature.

Understanding the Standards Required

What became clear with all the students at various points in the interviews was their concern relating to the level of work expected of them on a master's course. The following comments very much sum up the general view. 'I was not quite sure what a master's degree and academic writing entailed' (R 3). 'It

was level rather than the work itself' (R 6). However, whilst students generally thought that the goals of assignments were clear one of them did feel that there was some ambiguity in what had been asked, and another saw that she had had 'a slight misunderstanding about the original goals' (R 6) when she received feedback. If she had 'understood, could have done it, but didn't know I should have done it.' She also felt that as it was the first paper she had had to write 'generally all group were not sure exactly what to do.' There is, therefore some evidence that both the goals and the level of work were not clear to students.

The interviews indicated anxiety about what we expected from students in their coursework, and the level at which they had to write which was exacerbated by 'differences between lecturers not totally helpful' (R 7), and 'I want to know what that particular lecturer wants from a piece and I find they all want something different' (R 14)!

The Scope and Sources of Feedback

The second area of enquiry in the interviews was to try and establish with each student what they understood by the scope of the term 'feedback', and the ways in which they got feedback on their learning. The following provide a cross-section of the answers given:

- 'it provides guidance whether the message has been received, understood, accepted or challenged' (R 2);
- 'opinion or measure of the quality of a product or service' (R 9);
- 'feedback is the comments about a task or something which can be either negative or positive' (R 10);
- 'an evaluation of work' (R 1);

- 'a correction of what is handed in. Analysis of what should be improved: how to write better'(R 5);
- 'Comment from marker how I have done and to tell me how to improve' (R 13);
- 'Where things go wrong and how you get it right, a targeted approach' (R 8).

Overall there is a view expressed which would equate with the literature that feedback provides information on the quality of work, or an evaluation of that work. It indicates how improvements can be made, and/or how the parts that are wrong can be corrected. The comments take rather a systems oriented, and pragmatic approach to the process, perhaps emphasizing the links to constructivism and cybernetics made in Chapter One. Had I posed this question after asking about sources of feedback I believe I would have got a broader set of responses.

Sources of Feedback

Students were asked how they could obtain feedback. All the interviewees were slightly puzzled by this probably badly worded question, and needed prompting, so I asked if it was always linked to assessment. There was then general agreement that they sometimes received oral feedback in class, but surprisingly discussion with their peers was not regarded as particularly useful: six agreed it provided 'a variety of opinions' or 'made me realize what strengths and weaknesses I had', three occasionally discussed with their peers and three others said 'no' they didn't; one person said 'I haven't tried that' (R 9) and one wasn't sure what this meant! (R 13) The student who commented that some of his

peer group 'cared' about their progress others did not (R 1) touched on the range of motivations for people enrolling in the first place.

Questioned over self-reflection on their study and their results seven students said that they did in fact reconsider their assignment work once it was returned: one did so in conjunction with re-reading her work and the written feedback given on it, but another felt self-reflection was sometimes difficult because she could not always be sure that this was taking her in the right direction since the subject she was studying was new to her: another reference to the uncertainty involved in transferring to new subjects.

I included practice as a possible means of feedback which had a positive response from the three students who had computing/technical modules on their degrees, indicating perhaps that with the acquisition of skills such as programming, practice can be an important means of embedding knowledge and ensuring understanding.

The following chart provides a synopsis of the ways in which the interviewees gained feedback on their learning.

Feedback Type	Student Number													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Oral	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Written	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Peers	X	X	X	X	X	?	X			X	X	X		
Parents			X				X							
Friends			X	X	X	X	X			X			X	X
Other Contacts		X			X		X							
Wider Reading	X	X		X	X			X		X				
Reflection		X	X	X	X		X	X		X				
Practice			X		X			X						

Table 2 – Methods by which interviewees get feedback

My interpretation of these responses was that feedback was expected to be in written form and associated with assessment, and students had a rather narrow perception of how to gather information about their learning and understanding. There is no pattern as to ways in which students, by age, or by gender or by country of origin got feedback. The two students who did seek feedback from their parents were both from overseas. This confirms to me that within the business school we do not provide advice to students on how they can help themselves and enable them to become active and self-regulated learners.

This leads to over-reliance on the lecturers' views provided via infrequent written comments and fails to encourage students to become autonomous learners.

Whilst I did not ask the surveyed students to define feedback I did ask whether it was essential to learning on the course, 87.6 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement - the remainder felt it was not. However, the survey did isolate various methods of gaining feedback on learning and asked students whether they used them. The responses were very mixed. However one interprets the 'it depends' category, 20 per cent do not use their peers for feedback – **Q11, I get feedback from discussions with my peer group** – a favourable comparison with the interviewees, where approximately 33 per cent did not discuss with their peers. Is language an inhibitor for students' not using their peers for feedback? Twenty-seven per cent in the survey did not get feedback from wider reading a slightly smaller percentage than responses in the interviews – **Q13, I get feedback from wider reading on module topics.** This appears to indicate that a large number of students either do not read round their module subjects, or do not integrate the various aspects of their studies. **Q12** asked students **if they get feedback from reflecting on my reading and assignments**, and almost 50 per cent did not do so.

	Q11	Q11 %	Q12	Q12 %	Q13	Q13 %
Non-response	2	3.1	2	3.1	3	4.6
Not at all	4	6.2	3	4.6	7	10.8
Mainly Not	14	21.5	8	12.3	11	16.9
It Depends	22	33.8	21	32.3	25	38.5
Mainly Yes	21	32.3	30	46.2	18	27.7
Totally	2	3.1	1	1.5	1	1.5

Table 3 Responses to Questions 11-13

I looked for some correlation over use of feedback methods amongst the surveyed students: only eight gave positive responses to these three questions on discussions with peers, reflection on reading and assignments, and wider reading – just 12 per cent of the students: 14 students gave positive responses on discussion with peers, and reflection on reading and assignments – 21 per cent.

Feedback in Lectures and Seminars

In the interviews I asked students whether they thought that feedback was provided in lectures and seminars. The responses were that 'some lecturers did' (R 7). One response was 'would have liked an overview from the lecturer for the lecture and for the seminar' (R 5). Another student commented 'participation in lectures could be better: just feel there are no incentives to participate or even attend a lecture in many cases' (R 1). He went on to express disappointment that 'some students just choose to give in their work' and that this leads to a lack of opportunities for discussion of ideas. Another student commented that 'feedback was not always obvious; but 'there is usually some feedback on the

whole module' (R 3). He also added that there was immediate feedback on work in practical modules, and generally on case study work in seminars'.

Disappointingly, one student felt that some lecturers 'do not have objectives for their lectures' (R 7). There were more positive comments about feedback during seminars although it is difficult to draw conclusions since as with the lectures and as expected, it depended on the lecturer and tended to be inconsistent.

In the survey - **Question 9, I get feedback from recapping by the lecturer at the end of each lecture** and **Question 10, I get feedback from recapping by the lecturer during seminars** provided the following responses. I included these questions because, in the broader definition of feedback that I have taken I consider it is one way in which students can check on their own understanding of taught content, and a place where as discussed in the literature review by Hattie & Timperley (2007) 'feedback and instruction become intertwined' (p82).

	Q9	Q9 %	Q10	Q10 %
Non-response	2	3.1	3	4.6
Not at all	6	9.2	0	0
Mainly Not	12	18.5	10	15.4
It Depends	28	43.1	30	46.2
Mainly Yes	17	26.2	21	32.3
Totally	0	0	1	1.5

Table 4 – responses to Q9-10

The word 'recapping' was used in these two questions and I noted that several students did not respond to these questions and had underlined the word. Did they not know its meaning? Was this another indication of problems with language?

It is worrying that 43 per cent of students felt lecturers did not always go over the main points of the lecture and another 18 per cent felt it mainly didn't occur. When a topic has been totally covered and the main points recapped it often provides a means of clarifying points, and/or the explanation can help put various parts of the topic into an overall context. Repetition is generally considered a means of reinforcing learning and I wonder if in some cases lecturers do this but because of language issues students do not always recognise the fact. If these responses are an accurate reflection of what is happening then it is of concern from a teaching perspective.

Fortunately fewer students responded negatively as to whether there was recapping during seminars — but 46 per cent suggest that this does not always happen and this corresponds with the comments made during the interviews. These responses have to raise a question of the clarity of what is taking place in the lecture and seminar sessions. Are teachers' perceptions different from those of the student: on a personal level I have always tried to recap the main points of a lecture and say that is what I am doing. However I cannot be certain that there is overall understanding. In seminar sessions it is the more confident

students who will tend to dominate discussions and it can be difficult to get participation from some students. These responses, and my own experiences in the classroom link closely to the literature on participation of students from certain cultures, and from those who are less confident linguistically.

Feedforward

The interviewees felt that there was evidence of feedforward : 'I know a little better what is expected of me'; and five students were positive over this, citing particular modules where feedback had provided help in their subsequent work. One pilot student mentioned their job in particular over this, which was most encouraging, whilst another said it was 'useful for life improvement' (R 8). Interestingly one student felt that being older meant he was more receptive to using feedback and seeing how it could help him in the future (R 9).

Aside from the feedback there may be other factors to take into account here: all our modules have a set of learning objectives and each one of these objectives must be addressed in at least one of the assignments set. It is, therefore, quite possible that the two pieces of assessment vary sufficiently for there to be little overlap between one piece of work and the next. We also know the work is returned too late for students to have much time to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their work prior to submitting their next work or sitting the exam. It may also be the case that with little or no reflection some students fail to make connections as to how they can usefully use feedback in similar or indeed

different situations, although comments on areas such as structure and academic writing should provide help in a feedforward context.

The questionnaire revealed less agreement on the feedforward aspect of the written comments with 20 per cent disagreeing that comments on one assignment helped with subsequent work – **Question 17, The written feedback has been useful in helping me to improve my future work.**

	Q16	Q16 %	Q17	Q17 %
Non-Response	3	4.6	3	4.6
Strongly Disagree	1	1.5	1	1.5
Disagree	12	18.5	12	18.5
Agree	46	70.8	38	56.5
Strongly Agree	3	4.6	11	16.9

Table 5 Responses to Q16 -17

Student follow-up on Feedback

The general view from the interviewees over this point was that if they had time, they would seek clarification. It was also disappointing to see – **Question 18, When written feedback is not clear I usually seek some additional information from the tutor** - that only 37 per cent of students will generally ask for clarification if the written feedback is unclear and only five students regularly do this.

	Q18	Q18 %
Non-response	3	4.6
Not at all	1	1.5
Mainly Not	13	20
It Depends	24	36.9
Mainly Yes	18	27.7
Totally	6	9.2

Table 6 Responses to Q18

Some students did not find written feedback was useful and did not follow up on this. [**Question 16, I have found that the comments help me to understand the mark I have been given**]. Perhaps 'timeliness' is an issue with these comments as under additional comments made in the questionnaire were, we need 'faster feedback', and 'more prompt, written feedback'. One person claimed to have had work back after sitting the exam for that module which is quite out of line with the University guidelines on return of coursework, so that when it was eventually received it had little relevance for him.

Motivation

Of those I interviewed the majority found the 'comments very important, I am motivated by them', 'yes, I can't say always but most of times' (R 9). One student said 'no' (R 12) and another 'not always' (R 10) and the remainder were all positive over this. One student (R 2) felt that little motivation was passed on by staff: another felt there were 'poor' relationships with some lecturers, who appeared not to 'care' (R 1).

Clearly comments have a positive effect as 57 per cent felt it provided motivation to improve – **Question 19, The comments I have received have made me want to do better.** Despite some mixed opinions there was very high correlation – 67 per cent - amongst those who agreed both that comments were helpful and also felt that those comments received on coursework are an incentive to do better in future. [**Questions 15, I usually find the comments written on my assignments helpful**] (see page 130).

	Q19	Q19 %
Non-response	3	4.6
Not at all	1	3.1
Mainly Not	4	6.2
It Depends	19	29.2
Mainly Yes	30	46.2
Totally	7	10.8

Table 7 Responses to Q19 - The comments I have received have made me want to do better.

Academic Development

I wanted to find out whether, irrespective of other answers and comments, students felt that they were developing academically. I asked those I interviewed to rate their course on this factor on a scale of 1 to 5. The rating was equally divided: seven giving a three and seven a four; generally positive ratings, which I might have expected to be mostly a four given that these students had volunteered to give their opinions and were likely to be the more motivated students. One student said she had expected that 'professional

writing skills would be developed more' (R 3), and that although the Project management reports were realistic in terms of content they still had to be written in an academic style which he thought detracted from the work overall. Student (R 3) considered she was able to build her academic development on her previous work experience. Generally the comments were in line with the views of those completing the survey.

The response to **question 20 – The course that I am taking is encouraging my academic development** - were slightly more enthusiastic than the interviewees in that nearly 75 per cent considered their particular course was encouraging their academic development, implying that irrespective of individual views on other aspects of their learning environment courses are generally seen as developmental and that the majority of reactions to them are positive.

Social and Cultural Aspects of the Learning Environment

In the last group of questions I was seeking to find out whether students' previous experiences of teaching and learning had equipped them for the teaching styles at Westminster, and if they felt the information they had received about the courses had been both clear to them and sufficiently detailed.

Secondly, was the organizational and social context of their learning what they anticipated and compared with what they had been used in previous institutions.

The interviewees expressed the views that 'previous study was a good background to studying here, and I have been able to make use of my work experience, but there is not enough teaching on the MSc, and nobody has really told us what we should be doing – just had to get on with it!' (R 6). 'It is different here [Westminster] but maybe it is level mostly' (R 3). 'The presentation is different: here we have one long session a week, but I have been used to a number of shorter sessions through the week' (R 5).

These comments do, I think, indicate issues around course induction and transition, and the return to comments about uncertainty as to expectations of work at M level.

These views were re-enforced in the survey with 18 per cent of students disagreeing with **Question 24 – The way in which I studied before I enrolled at Westminster provided a good background to my studying on this course** - clearly showing that our induction process needs to include more explanation about how we present and teach our courses. A significant percentage clearly felt that they were being taught differently at Westminster from what they were used to, and a further six per cent chose not to reply, which I would take to mean uncertainty or negative reaction to the question. Therefore, roughly a quarter of those enrolled are not positive about this question. The response to **Question 23 - the way I would be taught, and the types of assessment that would be given were made clear to me at**

induction - showed 25 per cent did not find induction had provided clarity on teaching methods and assessment, with a 6 per cent non response level. This indicates that a great many students begin their studies uncertain about how they will be taught and what is expected of them, which implies more detailed transitional support is needed in their move to a new educational environment.

There was no correlation in the responses to these two questions between students who were coming to the UK for the first time, or had not studied for their first degree in English: in fact negative responses seemed to have been made by students who had attended western style universities, such as the US and Australia, so negative responses cannot just be linked to lack of understanding. One has to assume that the negativity is at least in part due to lack of adequate information.

	Q23	Q23 %	Q24	Q24 %
Non-Response	4	6.2	4	46.2
Strongly Disagree	1	1.5	3	4.6
Disagree	15	23.1	9	13.8
Agree	39	60	35	53.8
Strongly Agree	6	9.2	14	21.5

Table 8 responses to Q23-24

University and Course Regulations

The interviewees expressed differing opinions on the clarity of information given about courses. 'I felt the information was as clear as it could be at that point' and 'the University degree regulations were clear too'. Against this (R 6) expressed the following view that 'I had a lot of problems communicating with the University before I came and whilst here'. [This was the administrative aspect of the University] 'I have a feeling that we don't get what we should in terms of information. I did read the handbook, but is this acceptable – it is clear and accurate but there is a lot missing'.

Another student felt it had been unreasonable to be asked 'to decide in first two weeks which options to take in Semester Two – we were really not in a position to choose. We really didn't have enough information about anything' (R 5), but added that the option module that provided a podcast of information on the Blackboard site was helpful as it gave a chance to review the information when they wanted and then make a decision.

It is currently official University policy to require option choices within two weeks of enrolment, and students on some courses find it difficult to make choices when they have not studied some subjects before, or when they are taking the course as a means of career change. This is especially true for students taking practical computing modules for the first time as they have no idea whether they

can follow on with options in this type of work so early in the course. In reality there are few occasions when students cannot change their option choice at a later date, but it adds stress at the beginning of the course when it is not completely necessary.

This same student felt that 'the University regulations became clearer as the course went on' and I imagine this is true for many students when they follow up on regulations that are pertinent to them as individuals.

Another student said the 'course handbook explains the breakdown of the course, but is not always clear, and the staff listed are not always the ones who teach you'(R 7). She also wanted reading lists to be sent out ahead of enrolment. The latter point does depend on the course being taken as some courses do have a pre-reading list.

In the survey **Questions 21 – When I enrolled on the course the information that I was given about the course and the modules was clear to me** - and **Question 22 – The University regulations for my course are clear to me** - are fairly self-explanatory. They were included as a means of seeing how prepared students felt prior to beginning their studies and whether they understood the terms under which their course operated. About 70 per cent considered that the course regulations were clear to them and

roughly the same number thought that the information they had been given about the course and its modules was clear. This question might perhaps have been better split into two, to separate courses from modules. I suspect that some of the negative responses were related to specific modules that were less clearly described. Again, a significant number did not feel that there was either sufficient information or clarity about the course and the teaching and assessment methods. In the questionnaire 25 per cent felt the University regulations were unclear, with a different 25 per cent dubious about the clarity of the course information they received, the comments from individuals were very diverse. Only 6 per cent were totally satisfied in both questions.

The Effects of Organisational Culture on Student Learning

In a broader consideration of feedback the cultural and learning environment can be considered to affect student learning, therefore questions in this area were considered helpful.

As anticipated the responses around culture were very varied since interviewees came from such a variety of backgrounds. Some did comment on issues around coming to live in a different culture. For example one student found the UK culture much as she remembered from a visit but admitted 'it was not easy to settle in, but at least I had somewhere to live, some people had a lot of problems over accommodation at the beginning and in getting settled in' (R 6).

Another thought 'not too much of a culture shock in the University – not really' (R 5).

However, there were comments such as 'the academic culture is slightly lacking and may be because it is a business school.' This was from an older student who felt he had picked his friends as 'people I want to connect with. It seems that most people have just finished the BA and have different reasons for coming' (R 2): he already had several years work experience. Someone else thought there was 'a good culture here' (R 8), and another overseas student said she was 'used to the culture of the UK' (R 7) and enjoyed all the events organized for her course in marketing and would have liked more of them.

A different student who was used to the UK and knew he liked it better than the US, where he was not happy with the lifestyle, [not a US national] thought that 'socially it is great, and no US campus has a bar!' but that the WBS culture was 'OK, but not great' (R 3).

Despite this issue one response related to the learning environment of the course stated 'I like the multicultural aspect of the course', (R 5) and another that 'I love the international bit, I really like this educational community – it is a definite plus' (R 3). However I suspect that in both cases this was unexpected because of the tone in which the remarks were made.

Although asked separately, students linked their views on the business school and university culture and community; this gave the impression that they viewed them in much the same way. However, linked to the responses in the survey there is again an area of concern about how students perceive the academic community and culture in which they are studying. There is some confirmation with the literature that coming to live and study in a different culture can cause unforeseen difficulties.

The final two questions sought a viewpoint around cultures in the institution, firstly at University level and then within the Business School: 10 students chose not to reply to either question. Firstly, 25 per cent did not agree with the statement in **Question 25 - I feel that I belong to an academic community at this University.** Secondly, 20 per cent did not find **the culture of the business school congenial – Question 26,** whilst a further 15 per cent chose not to respond to the question. There could be many reasons for this but I would have to deduce that they preferred not to respond rather than reply negatively. If this is the case around 35 per cent would find the culture in the business school uncongenial. There is little correlation over these responses with just five students giving negative responses on both questions. Both responses give cause for concern if culture and social context impact on students reactions to learning and feedback.

	Q25	Q25 %	Q26	Q26 %
Non-Response	4	6.2	10	15.4
Strongly Disagree	2	3.1	1	1.5
Disagree	14	21.5	12	18.5
Agree	38	58.5	38	58.5
Strongly Agree	7	10.8	4	6.2

Table 9 Responses to Q25-26

Language

I have deliberately made language the last area to discuss because the comments that are relevant permeated through responses to all the areas covered in the interviews. It became clear that the students' command of English was generally good and because of comments made about language during these interviews I have to surmise that those who felt their language was weak may not have been sufficiently confident to volunteer to be interviewed. This makes me think that responses may have been biased in that they were the views of a group of students who were particularly able to express themselves in English and may have been having a different experience of their time at Westminster than those with weaker English. Indeed this was hinted at in two responses in the interviews, one from a student who had studied in English before and one who had not: both felt that the levels of English amongst colleagues on their courses reduced the level at which the lectures and seminars were pitched and consequently were 'not at such a high level as the reading that is set' (R 5). They suggested that 'some cannot understand' and 'some cannot study in English' (R 6), and one of the students 'found it a culture shock over the

English-speaking aspect' (R 3) on a course based in a London university when he had been used to studying in groups where English was the second language before, and had generally found those language levels higher. There is also a link to the responses related to written comments on assignments not always being understood because of the language. Whilst these comments are not directly related to student opinion on feedback I think they are relevant because where there are issues of poor language levels and lack of understanding then it follows that this must affect the student experience and understanding of feedback.

Student support services are run at campus level and an internal report for this centre indicates that there are indeed problems for many students over language and study skills. The areas below are the main ones that the report highlighted as those where most academic support was provided.

- Struggling with basic English (grammar/syntax/vocabulary/ comprehension/ speech);
- Lack of familiarity/confidence with particular written forms (e.g. reports and dissertations);
- A tendency to lose focus when addressing and processing written tasks;
- Poor attention to the precise wording of the task;
- A limited or confused sense of how to create an effective structure in written work;

(Internal Report of WBS Postgraduate Student Services 2009)

Some of the approximate statistics from this report for the same year indicate 70% of those seeking help were non native speakers, with full-time postgraduate

students from WBS making up the largest number of those seeking help. This evidence together with some doubts about whether all the questions in the survey were always understood, and comments from the interviews suggest that there are real issues about language ability affecting the delivery of our courses and consequently influencing feedback.

Additional Comments

From the interviewees one mature student commented that she 'thought the course might be too general for her to find employment afterwards, so she wondered if she had wasted her time' (R 6). A second was very critical at several points in the interview about the staff: she liked them 'to be lively, and animated, and to have motivation passed on' (R 7) and felt that this had not been the case. In contrast a third student was 'reasonably happy with what I am getting: I do find that I don't think we are developing our professional writing skills' (R 5). Another student 'had few expectations when I came here, and feel there is more than one way of designing a course' (R 3). However, he would have liked 'more hands-on experience, and not just reading case studies but having talks from IT experts for example'. This latter comment is interesting to me: when over a two year period my department organized afternoon sessions with several IT experts coming in to talk to students the turn out was so low that it was embarrassing, and we decided not to continue.

As might be expected few students in the survey added additional comments related to their learning environment [12 out of 64] or to how their learning experience [14 out of 64] might be improved but there is a group of responses which are quite telling. The majority are negative.

The first group of comments fall under Mintzberg's (1979) 'hygiene factor' heading:

- 'the administration at Westminster is not great'
- 'the School should be more organised'
- 'café West' [campus canteen]
- 'Not enough seats in some modules'
- 'temperature of the rooms'
- 'the facility of the library is poor: computer labs are bad' [the latter may refer to new siting of labs underground as the hardware is never more than 2 years' old]
- 'school time is not designed in the best way'.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions from such a range of comments but there are clearly issues about the state of the campus and the day-to-day facilities which some students feel strongly about. This is evidenced by the frequent comments at course committees about issues related to overall administration in particular, and also the condition of the campus and overcrowding in some rooms.

The second group of comments is more closely linked to learning experiences.

- 'a more friendly environment' would improve experience
- 'more class discussions'
- 'not enough interaction with peers'

- 'even though teachers and staff [admin] are presented as helpful when approached individually their help is minimal'
- 'I want to feel more appreciated'
- 'if things were explained better and there was less information'
- 'maybe make a bit of adjustment on the proportion of exam/report'
- 'more prompt written feedback'
- 'motivating students'

The two positive comments were that 'Bloomberg [real time financial information] is wonderful' and the course 'is up to my expectations, very satisfying'. The comments above do indicate that there may be problems with the availability of academic staff, and how far the staff are motivational. Reading these comments myself makes me feel a little bleak over the way some students view their time at Westminster.

Finally, in searching for patterns in the survey replies it is interesting to note that of the five students who gave positive responses in relation to how they gained feedback [Questions 11, 12 and 13] their background was not perhaps what might have been anticipated since they were all were overseas students, with three in the UK for the first time. Four had studied their first degree in English and the fifth had studied partially in English. Of all those surveyed 29 per cent had come to the UK for the first time when they enrolled on one of our Masters' courses. This type of evidence indicates how difficult it is to make judgments about a group of students or how they will respond, and how important it is for lecturing staff not to have stereotypical views about students from different backgrounds, either home and overseas.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have looked at the evidence obtained from both the interviews and the survey to postgraduate students, and have tried to find patterns in the responses given in the survey. This has proved almost impossible, which perhaps provides evidence of the individuality of each student's learning career and disposition, as well as the range of differing needs across such a diverse student base. All factors making the job of the lecturer more difficult. What primarily emerges are issues around both language levels and adequate induction.

Perhaps more importantly, every question in the survey had negative replies around 20 per cent, indicating that overall WBS could improve the student experience of feedback and learning.

The following chapter discusses the findings from the study and draws conclusions from the evidence in relation to how this one particular group of students experience and understand feedback and their learning environment generally.

CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter examines the findings from the primary and secondary data reported in the previous chapter, and leads on to make recommendations for future action based on the conclusions.

It is worth reiterating that the responses given in the interviews may have shown some bias because those overseas students who volunteered had well-developed levels of English and were able to express themselves clearly: therefore, their experiences of studying at Westminster may not have been similar to those with less developed English language skills. However, those answering the questionnaire were a cross-section of the relevant postgraduate student population and would have partially evened out any bias from the interviewees.

A further point to note is that in the responses to the survey the majority of questions had a negative response of around 25 per cent: analysis did not indicate that any one student held negative views on all aspects of the questionnaire, nor at the same time did any single student give totally positive responses. This reveals that overall these particular students considered there was room for improvement in almost every area covered in the survey.

Findings from the Study

The main findings from this study indicate that

- Issues of language affect student understanding and experience of feedback;
- Students are uncertain about the levels of work expected of them at postgraduate level;
- Written comments provide the main means of feedback but students had issues over timeliness, clarity, and specificity;
- Students' have some concepts on how to gain feedback on their learning but those they do have are not exploited by lecturers;
- The students surveyed exhibited immense cultural and learning career diversity;
- Institutional regulations and administrative expediency adversely impinge on the teaching, learning and assessment process;

Two of these points emerged as the main findings of this study, which were problematic for students and which on reflection had an effect on the responses that I obtained in both the interviews and from the questionnaire. Primarily, one of language, but secondly one of student uncertainty over the level of study required at masters' level, which may in part be influenced by language issues.

The Problems of Language

The first language of learning for the students in this study is very varied: some have studied in English but overseas, some have studied in English in the UK, and others have studied in their own languages prior to enrolling on their current courses at Westminster. Irrespective of the fact that all students enrolling on our masters courses have an IELTS score of at least 6.5, where English is not the first language, there are indications that this may not be a totally satisfactory indicator of suitability for study at this level. The literature suggests that English as a second language qualification will have generalized language study based around the ability to 'get by' in reading, writing and spoken English, but is unlikely to incorporate language associated with academic study, and some of the comments related to language in feedback comments indicates that comprehension causes difficulties.

Various comments relating to language permeated the interviews with two interviewees saying they considered differing levels of English had a detrimental effect on course delivery, believing the level at which lectures and seminars were pitched was lower than the level of English in their required reading. The literature showed that use of language was a key issue for some international students (Carless 2006) and one particular paper (Littlemore 2001) discussed metaphor use in lectures and the confusion that this could cause to those studying in a second language. The literature also referenced student difficulties

of comprehension with lecturers teaching in their second language: particularly problematic for students whose first language is not English. I found evidence that although students thought they understood learning outcomes for their assignments, when work was returned there was a realization that perhaps that was not the case. As already mentioned the language used in written comments was not always transparent to students.

Of less importance but reinforcing lack of understanding of the more formal 'academic language' was the realization by some interviewees that the rules and regulations associated with the particular course and degrees generally were written in a way that was not easily accessible to them, so that they had to re-read parts they needed to clarify.

Unfortunately, whilst understanding of written comments was discussed with the interviewees the use of language did not form a discreet area of questioning either in the interviews or the survey, although I imagine those answering the survey would have been unwilling to admit their language levels were not adequate for the course. Having previously stated those being interviewed had good levels of English I suspect adequate understanding is a major issue for many of our students in their lectures and seminars. I have been surprised by the comments made to me about language, and have to consider that use of language at an institutional level in terms of documentation, for example

examination regulations, at a school level in the format of module syllabi and learning outcomes, at a teaching level in lectures and seminars, and in relation to understanding of written feedback is a major issue for many students, affecting their whole experience at Westminster. Comments about language permeated the interviews I undertook, and in my view this is an area which needs significant action, which if successful would have a positive impact on feedback.

Student understanding of masters' level study

A point that emerged forcefully in the interviews was a lack of understanding of the level of study expected on Masters courses; the number of times it was mentioned, both directly and indirectly, implied that this in itself caused stress to students, certainly at the beginning of the course, and probably for some on an ongoing basis. This lack of understanding was reinforced by evidence of help sort in relation to assignment work and what was expected, through the postgraduate student support office.

There were strong links with the literature, particularly Ramaprasad's (1982) view of the need for reference levels and Sadler's (1989) view that knowledge of the gap between current and expected levels of performance was essential. Students have completed around twenty-five per cent of their assignments on full-time courses before they get feedback that tells them if they are writing in the right style and at the right level.

Currently there is almost no help provided to students making the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study. Induction does discuss the ways in which students will be taught but does not include anything related to level of work, or interpretation of learning outcomes. Uncertainty for students could be reduced if some of the more mechanistic aspects of assignment work were covered, such as providing a bibliography, quotations versus plagiarism, report formats and essay structures: students could do some initial work in these areas during their induction sessions. Recent papers in the literature suggest an acceptance of the need to help students recognize the standard of work expected at postgraduate level. Induction sessions would provide a good starting point for supporting students in beginning to make the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study, ease some of the uncertainty about what was expected, and an opportunity to consider how assignments will be marked and evaluated could be incorporated. Whether induction should be totally at the beginning of a course is debatable: when an environment is new it is hard for anyone to take in a whole new set of guidelines and information and it might be preferable to consider spreading the induction sessions across the first part of students' first semester. It would also be useful to introduce ideas on different forms of feedback, and issues related to studying in a multicultural group.

At the moment processes must be reinforcing in a negative way the perception of a 'them and us' situation in the learning environment of the business school –

the guild knowledge versus the outsider - which is likely to be exacerbated for the weaker students. Incorporating issues that have impact for students moving from one study level to another into induction would have two advantages: for the student points of uncertainty would be reduced, and for staff there would be a clearer understanding of areas that cause concern to students. Currently, many of these concerns are addressed by support staff away from the classroom: greater integration that brought these concerns into the classroom and were directly addressed by lecturers would be advantageous.

The two factors of language, and uncertainty over standards, are I think an important finding from this research. The ability to understand is an essential and students' experience of both their learning environment and the feedback they receive will be compromised by inadequate language skills. Successful teaching delivery must make clear what levels of achievement are required by the learner, and so there are pointers in my recommendations for changes to address these two areas.

Do students experience quality written feedback?

By asking interview students to bring in a piece of marked work in order to find out if how they viewed the feedback, [reiterated by 81% of those surveyed who found written comments helpful and motivational] I was also providing an opportunity to see whether the written comments supplied equated with the view of quality feedback in the literature. In a general way this was true in

terms of being helpful, relating to style and structure, showing strengths and weaknesses and providing some feedforward suggestions, and not writing comments relating to the student personally. However, nearly 50% commented on the illegibility of the comments, and several on problems with the language used in terms of clarity and specificity.

One factor which clearly affected students was the timeliness of feedback with a number saying it needed to be quicker: interviewees commenting that the return of one piece of work usually came when they were already working on their next papers and, therefore, had no time to follow up or reflect on this feedback and adjust their work to take account of the comments just received. Students did appreciate the immediacy of feedback in practical classes. The literature provides diverse views on timeliness of feedback, but it is clear this group of WBS students felt they were waiting too long, and this was maybe exacerbated because of a lack of general oral feedback on assignments to the group as a whole.

There were mixed opinions on feedforward aspects amongst the interviewees, but three-quarters of those surveyed found written comments helpful in relation to future work. It may be the type of written comments that are a factor with this aspect of feedback: interviewees found comments related to structure, style

and level were of more value in a feedforward context than any associated with task, and timeliness may also have some influence.

I had hoped that there would be clear evidence that the written feedback supplied was of a high quality and I would then be in a position to argue there were other reasons affecting student experience and understanding that were of prime importance. Whilst style of feedback appears good, the use of language and poor writing clearly have a deleterious effect and made feedback in those situations inaccessible. The survey showed 20% had negative views regarding written feedback. As a result I would have to say the student experience of written feedback is not reliably a quality one, and is essentially 'outcome feedback' as described by Butler & Winnie (1985).

Student understanding on how to gain feedback

It was clear from both the interviews and the survey that there is limited understanding about how feedback on learning can be obtained. The interviewees initially related feedback to written comments on assessment, but on prompting there was some agreement that this might be orally, in seminar classes in particular, but generally other methods were not considered: surprisingly discussion with peers was used by only about one third of those answering the questionnaire, and although nine of the interviewees cited its use it was not on a regular basis. Just under half the students in the survey said they received feedback from reflecting on their reading and assignments. When

asked about feedback in lectures and seminars the majority did not consider that they regularly received feedback in this way, and the interviewees, with one exception, said there was no oral feedback on assignments given to the class as a whole, and no reference to them until the work was returned.

Whilst the latest QAA guidelines suggest that a range of feedback methods should be incorporated into courses the University guidelines very much stress the need for written feedback to each student. Overall, the student experience of feedback from this study suggests that they expect written comments will be the main conduit for feedback. Clearly some students do have a wider understanding of how they can obtain feedback but there seem to be two limiting factors here: firstly if and when oral feedback was given in class it was perhaps not always recognized as such, and secondly there was no evidence from the interviews that students were encouraged, or helped, in how to best use their peers as a means of enhancing their learning. Perhaps it is true that students are not making use of all the means of feedback available to them but I found no evidence to suggest that generally lecturing staff either tried to use different ways of providing feedback or promoted different ways of students seeking feedback: the result is they are not primed to look for other means of support, such as discussion with their peer group.

I believe an important factor here is derived from an institutional requirement. Feedback has to be provided, and one way of ensuring that this occurs is to require staff to provide written feedback on coursework. Provision can be confirmed by external examiners and through internal quality checks. Regulations at University level have been introduced relating to timescales for written feedback. The institutional emphasis is thus placed on the written form as proof of quality provision, seemingly to the exclusion of other methods. This is reinforced in teaching and learning documentation. At a local level the fact that academic managers, and teaching and learning committees, also stress the importance of written feedback leads to other forms being overlooked, and probably a viewpoint by many lecturers that feedback requirements are being met. In reality, there seems to be a similar situation within WBS to the one that Burke (2009) found at Wolverhampton; students do not have strategies for using feedback effectively, and staff rather assume that students arrive with these skills.

From what I learnt from the interviews, plus considering the way in which the weekly timetable and the academic year is organized, it seems there is little or no variety in course module delivery and the way academic staff generally present material and provide feedback on learning. The actual physical accommodation makes variety of delivery methods difficult in some cases. This in itself advantages some students familiar with these methods, and

disadvantages those who learn in different ways and perhaps prefer oral rather than written feedback or a mixture of both, or who previously experienced different teaching methods, or indeed more teaching per se across the week. There also needs to be less reliance on written feedback: relying on this form means that students can only expect feedback once whilst studying each module. Their end of module work will not be returned until after the module is completed.

Reducing the reliance on the written form of feedback, is one of the points that I have highlighted in my recommendations, as I believe some aspects can be improved upon quite quickly through guidelines and staff development at a local level within the school.

Cultural and Social Influences

It is a little more difficult to assess the effects of cultural and social issues on student feedback and learning. Ascertaining where each student, either interviewed or surveyed, studied up to the age of 18 shows the range of cultural backgrounds – 41 countries were cited amongst this group of students alone - so there can be little doubt of the diversity of our student population. The various languages of first degree study indicate that there is no dominant culture in the postgraduate classrooms at Westminster, not even an English one. It is also probable that during their studies students will be taught by staff whose own

language is not English, an area causing learning problems according to the literature.

The only significant non-response in the survey – 15 per cent - was on the question of a congenial culture, with a further 20 per cent finding the culture uncongenial. So, about one-third was either not happy with the culture or did not choose to comment on it, and one quarter of students considered they did not feel part of an academic community at the University: and these views were backed-up by comments from the interviewees. Differences in culture and language and past student experiences are likely to account for these views.

For some students, possibly those whose English is less practiced and who are in the UK for the first time, there is the double culture shock of studying in a multi-cultural environment as well as settling into life in a different culture: one of the most articulate interviewees found this an issue despite having stayed in the UK previously. It is not difficult to imagine how difficult orientation must be for those coming to live in a strange country and a new college, where they will study in their second language, for the first time.

Although considerable effort is made during induction and throughout the year to encourage students to get to know others on their through course by joining in

regular planned social activities, it may be that it is with academic activities where greater support within the course group is needed.

One cannot be definite about how culture affects feedback and learning for any individual: coupled with the language factors already discussed, and the evidence from the literature that both cultural and linguistic factors impact on how individuals adapt and understand new learning environments there is sufficient evidence, given the huge cultural diversity of this group of students, to suggest that aspects of culture significantly affect teaching and learning in the classroom.

The literature relating to international students features emphasizes heterogeneity and homogeneity, not only from the perspective of whether all overseas and home students are seen as two differing but homogenous groups, but whether all students are encouraged to welcome the diversity within a group and to be willing to work with students from different cultures in seminar groups and assignment work. Cultural expectations are thought to play a large part here. My experience tells me the predominant staff viewpoint on this student body is one of perceived cultural differences amongst Confucian and western background students, but a tendency to view the students en masse as overseas or home, with little sensitivity to the problems that home or western students

may find in studying in a multi-cultural environment such as they find in the Business School.

By this stage in their learning careers these postgraduate students will have developed personal learning dispositions and maybe feel they do not fit in with the styles of teaching and learning they encounter which could detrimentally affect how they approach their learning and feedback: evidence from the questionnaire suggests there is inadequate preparation at induction for the teaching styles they will encounter at Westminster.

These cultural and social aspects imply there are many variables in the ways students respond to situations, and they will be factors for consideration in teaching delivery, devising assessment, and providing feedback. To cater for this diversity provision should be made for students to be exposed to a wider range of delivery methods other than three hour lecture/seminar blocks and feedback needs to be transparently provided on learning and performance in a variety of ways. Adaptation and timing of the induction programme to aid transition to the learning environment of Westminster could be helpful to all students as the recommendations suggest.

I tried to find out if there were feelings amongst the students of belonging to an academic community at the University, and whether the culture in the Business

School was congenial: as discussed above there was considerable negative feeling, and under 'other comments' it was noted that the culture was neither friendly, helpful or motivational; several interviewees indicated the atmosphere was not as 'academic' as they might have expected.

Organisational and Managerial Factors

The literature suggesting that institutional regulations and the organization of the academic calendar can impinge on the way in which teaching is organized also suggests that there can be local level adjustments: there is evidence that at Westminster this is not entirely true. Students talked of the need for prompter feedback. Interviewees found that they did not have time to reflect on feedback because they were too busy writing their end of module assignments by the time the first assignments were returned. Unfortunately, few students said they bothered to ask for clarification if they were uncertain about the feedback they received. Bunching of assignment submission dates is almost inevitable due to the length of the teaching semester, and the timescale requirements for returning marked work to students. With full-time students studying four modules each semester there is bound to be overlap in preparation of their assignment work, and students said this had some detrimental effect on opportunities to benefit fully from the feedback they did receive. This, alongside the point that interviewees raised of different staff looking for different things in work submitted for assessment, gave the impression of points in the academic year when students, and, based on personal experience, staff as well, were

focusing on meeting deadlines and administrative requirements with time for little else.

Some of the timescales that are written into the calendar are there for administrative convenience rather than on educational grounds. At the time of writing this chapter, there are discussions taking place on rearranging the academic calendar, including some modules being run across two semesters rather than all being completed in one. This arrangement should enable a greater spread of submission dates for assignment work and give students more opportunity to reflect on their feedback and seek clarification. Changes of this kind ought to provide an improved learning cycle for students on all courses and afford greater time for self reflection on their work.

Internationalisation

At a personal level, when I reflect on our postgraduate provision, which has really 'just grown' over a decade, I know that we have not made a clear decision about the masters courses we are offering, and this raises the question of the expectations we give to prospective students. Do students come to use because they think we offer an English education in a group of primarily English-speaking students taught by lecturers with English as their first language: or do they anticipate the multi-cultural nature of the courses and expect an international approach to their study.

At an institutional level I am not aware internationalization as a concept has been discussed, and, therefore, as the literature suggests, a strategic approach to what we are doing is lacking, with different course teams having differing views about what our focus is, or should be. This lack of strategic focus may present students with an inaccurate picture which may mean impacts on their attitudes about both the Business School and the University after they have arrived. What appears to have happened in WBS is that postgraduate student numbers have grown rapidly and courses themselves are not built on an institutional concept of internationalization partly because we have been taken almost by surprise by the diversity of the students we attract.

At a School level it also means staff and administrators may have different expectations of how they should relate to our postgraduate students, and what constitute reasonable levels of support to provide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations made below are aimed at a local audience; that is WBS or the University of Westminster. There are a number of recommendations that can be made following this piece of research, which could be quite quickly incorporated as common practice in the Business School.

1 In the short term I would recommend the following:

The need for staff discussion around feedback, and/or provision of a staff handout that incorporates

- A set of guidelines for good quality written feedback, together with advice on how students can be helped to make use of the feedback they receive;
- Suggestions for integrating teaching and feedback in the classroom to enable staff to gain first-hand understanding of feedback and learning issues their students encounter;
- Alternative methods of feedback and why their use may help cater for students who learn in different ways;
- How students can be encouraged to use methods of feedback, such as peer discussion, to support their learning.

The above topics could also be targeted during the regular staff development sessions held in the business school.

2 Revisions to the induction programme for each postgraduate course to include incorporation of study on the transition postgraduate study to include at least expected levels of attainment, the possible scope of feedback, and the benefits of studying in a diverse student group.

3 Review of the adequacy of IELTS entry requirements, alongside a review of the content of 'English for Academic Purposes' module which could perhaps be run from by the business school to ensure the right language focus.

Address use of formal academic language in learning outcomes, module schemes of work, and syllabi, with the aim of making content more accessible to students.

4 Developmental sessions for academic staff teaching postgraduate students that extend knowledge of teaching heterogeneous groups with a multicultural and multilingual background.

5 At an institutional level there is a need for internationalization as a concept to be put on the agenda and a strategy developed for this area of work within the institution.

Whilst these recommendations are geared at a local level, there is the likelihood that there are common issues for similar institutions attracting students from across the globe onto postgraduate courses.

CONCLUSIONS

I would have to conclude that what I have found in carrying out this study is disappointing in terms of student experience of feedback which should generally be better than it appears. I am not convinced that as their course progresses students gain learning skills on how to close the gap between their work and expected levels of attainment. Modular and semesterised courses may compound this issue as each module, and each lecturer essentially begins from scratch with no carry over from previous study.

Emphasis at an institutional and school level is on the written form, with little incentive for staff to provide feedback by other means, or encouragement for students to understand other methods of obtaining feedback. At Westminster centrally imposed organizational issues from the top down encroach on delivery methods and timing of assessment and feedback, enabling little scope for flexibility at a local level. I have found the diversity of the students' learning experiences at the time of enrolment, coupled with the mixture of cultural and linguistic backgrounds from which they come, to be important factors in their reactions to the lecture/seminar learning environment at Westminster, and in

how they experience and understand feedback as individuals. Addressing issues relating to these factors will be equally as important as improving feedback itself.

Whilst the definition of feedback that I took for the purposes of this study is very wide, it has shown that students are aware of other means of obtaining feedback, but there is little evidence of these alternatives being exploited, and no active guidance on making the best use of any alternatives nor support in taking responsibility for their learning. It has also shown dependence within the system, by academic staff and student expectation, on sporadic written feedback. This reliance does nothing to help students to become autonomous learners. The definition that I used is broad, but I believe it has shown that all the topics that I covered in the literature review do in some degree have a bearing on how students experience and understand feedback.

Every university and its student body will be unique in some way and, therefore, the use of case studies to investigate pedagogy is essential when trying to investigate particular learning issues. If not, over-reliance on the literature and the experiences of others could mean implementing changes that failed to recognize the dominant factors within that particular environment.

CONTRIBUTION TO PROFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDING

I wanted to look at a wider definition of feedback in this study, not simply in relation to assessment, and so the study I set myself was 'Factors that Influence the Student Understanding and Experience of Feedback'.

There is little contained in the literature about feedback with postgraduate students, but where it does appear it is usually related to one particular aspect of feedback. In this case study I have broadened the definition to include the context in which students learn, and the background of students at enrolment. I believe this approach has been valid.

What I have concluded is how unsatisfactory it is to look at feedback in isolation as the context in which learning takes place plays a major contributory role, as does the make up of the particular student body. In fact, what I have found in this case study is that unforeseen factors one might not initially consider directly related to feedback appear to play a dominant role due in part to the diversity of the student background. Issues of language and uncertainty about studying at postgraduate level are significant elements. Subsidiary issues may be restrictions such as tight timescales and modularization set in a semesterised calendar imposed by the institution allowing little or no time for receiving and reflecting on feedback, also raising the question of whether modular schemes

provide an appropriate format for postgraduate study, or allow for adequate induction to a new learning environment and unfamiliar levels of expectation.

Carrying out this study has led me to conclude that emphasis in our teaching is back to front. Too much class contact time is spent disseminating subject knowledge that is readily available in relevant textbooks. The balance of teaching needs to change, with more time devoted to improving learning and study skills, so that students understand how best to achieve the learning outcomes of their modules and courses and are encouraged to become autonomous learners. To do this would mean not only major reconsideration of teaching and delivery methods but persuading academic staff these changes would be advantageous. The gain would be courses that take a more student-centred approach emphasizing the need for students to be actively involved in their learning and able to benefit from feedback they receive.